

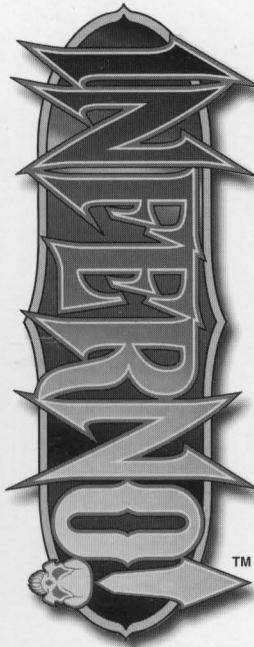
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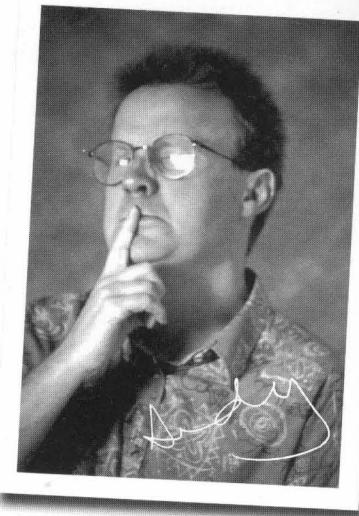
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T'S KIND OF dull today. Rained yesterday. I mean, really threw it down. Big floods a week ago. Seems to have been doing that a lot recently. And I expect there's still a water shortage. Wrong sort of rain was the last I heard (although what with it being wet and coming from the sky, I don't see what more you could expect from it).

Maybe we've finally reached the point where 'rain' isn't adequate enough as a word, and we should have a thousand different terms to cover the myriad subtle variations we get on your basic rain here in the UK: 'spitting', 'cats and dogs', 'drizzle' are good starters, but they don't really do it justice. Galling really, when I think how pleasant it was in San Diego last week. The sparkling waters by Coronado, balmy evenings at restaurants in the gas-lamp quarter. Work of course, you understand, ahem. Still, at least it's just rain – lucky we don't have snow and typhoons. On their way, mark my words. After all, it's October, isn't it, so what do you expect? Sun? Blue skies? No chance, mate.

Hang on a minute, not it's not October actually, it's flipping August. Sure, by the time you get your hands on this *Inferno!* it will be the end of October, maybe November even, but we work way in advance here at the Black Library. Right now, for me it's August! So how come it's teeming down? Oops, I'm supposed to be talking about *Inferno!*, not the weather. Even if it does pre-occupy us British somewhat – did I mention it rained yesterday?



WHERE WAS I? Ah yes, *INFERNO!* issue nine. What a corker! I mean, not one but two cracking stories with 'Wolf' in the title, an amazing double-length bomber crew story and feature from Gav Thorpe and Karl Kopinski, more blood-soaked *Obvious Tactics*, not to mention more comic strip action from Simon 'Sinister Dexter' Davis.

I mean, just look at that blazing cover: a big red daemon in a lake of fire, topped off with a big burning *Inferno!* logo. Makes you feel hot just to look at it. Must be summer.

Right then, here's me favourite poolside spot, now where's me deck chair and shades?

Waiter, an ice-cool lager when you're ready – make it a pint!

Andy Jones
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INSIDE...

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Daemon

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4 Wolf in the Fold

A strange and sinister Tilean assassin has come to the Temple of Sigmar in Nuln to confess to his crimes. But is there a darker reason for his arrival? By *Ben Chessell*; illustration by *Wayne England*.

16 Unearthed Remains

It's another dull night in the Charnel Pit, in the back-streets of Altdorf, when the talk turns to the subject of Necromancy... Script by *Gordon Rennie*, art by *Simon Davis*, letters *Gordon Robson*.

22 Malphus 'Claw' Driessen, Van Saar Ganger

Illustration by *Jeff Waye*.

23 The Lake

In the deepest, darkest corners of the Underhive on Necromunda, the secrets of the ancients are waiting to be rediscovered. By *Tully R Summers*.

29 Obvious Tactics

On Obzidion, the clock is ticking down towards the Imperium bombardment and time is running out for the Blood Angels and their Callidus ally. Script and art by *David Pugh*.

31 Acceptable Losses

Jaeger's new Marauder squadron are more than a little rough and ready. But with an immense Ork space hulk bearing down on the Imperium forces there's an ideal chance for them to prove their real mettle. By *Gav Thorpe*.

50 Acceptable Losses: Raptor Squadron

The men and Marauders of Flight Commander Jaeger's squadron. Art and design by *Karl Kopinski*.

54 A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

White Company are unhappy when they are assigned to dull escort duty. But soon it becomes clear that this is a far from cushy mission. By *Dan Abnett*; illustration by *Kev Hopgood*.

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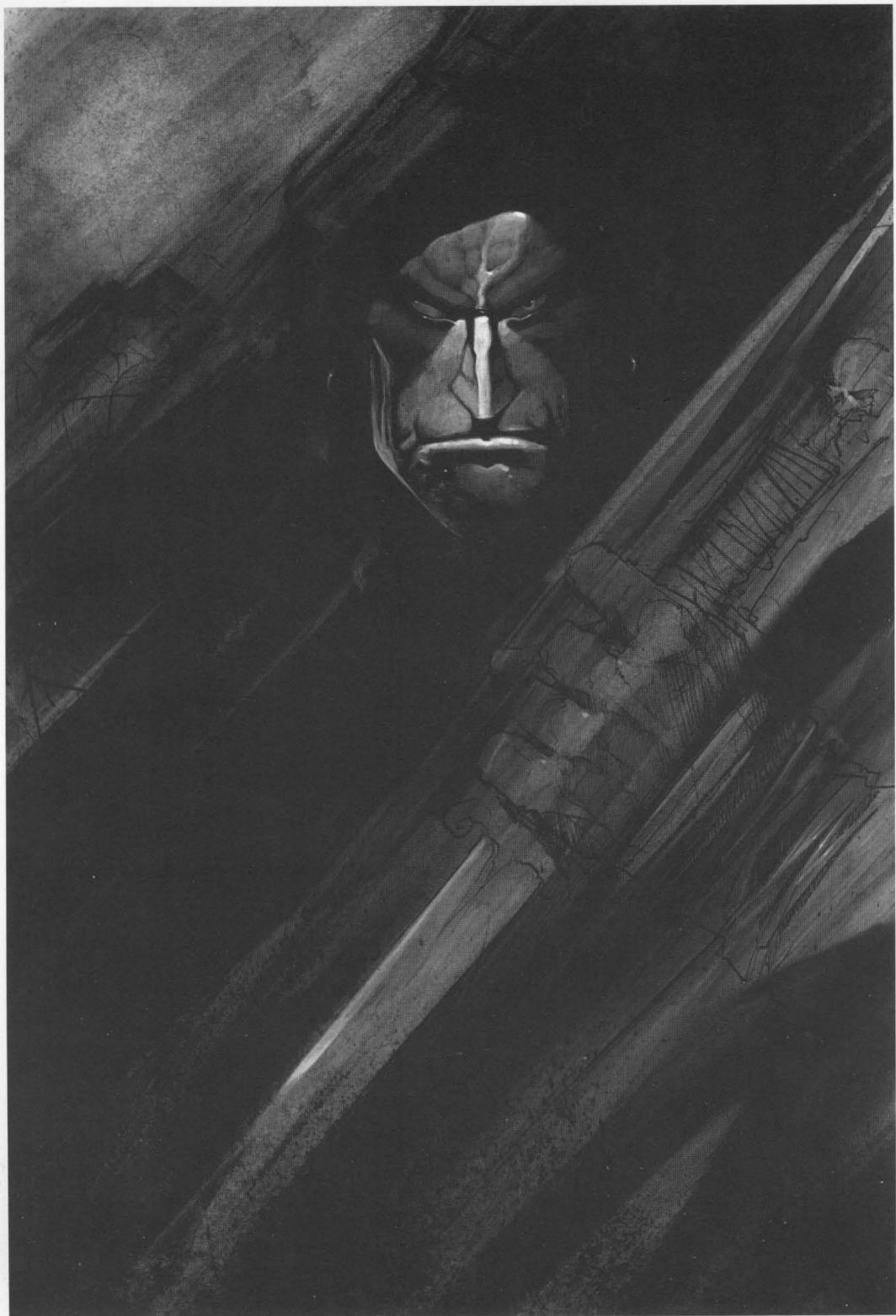
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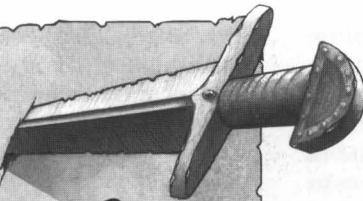
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Wolf in the Fold

by
*Ben
Chessell*

THE LIGHT IN THE temple at night had been reduced to two iron braziers in deference to lean times. The stone pillars leapt into the resulting darkness, supporting a vaulted roof of pure midnight. An insistent drip of water had found its way through the tiles above and hissed into one of the braziers, as regular and relentless as a torturer's whip.

Magnus, named for 'The Pious', straightened from where he was squatting to cover his sandals with his robe, his sole meagre defence against the cold, and resumed scrubbing the altar. Chores were performed at night by the boys. Sigmar's altar must never be touched by an untrained hand and yet it must shine like a looking glass come morning. Magnus wondered if his namesake had ever considered this paradox, or indeed polished the altar. Certainly the Arch-Lector did not do so now, cocooned in his velvet sheets with a concubine like as not, his privacy enforced by gates and blades.

The knock on the huge doors caused Magnus to drop his bucket and spill water and sand on the piecemeal image of a rampant Heldenhammer which adorned the knave of the Nuln temple. The mosaic, picked out in tiles of blue, white and gold, made little sense to a viewer as close as Magnus. Six tiles comprised the hero's nose which only took on a convincing curvature with some distance and a fair amount of latitude on the behalf of the observer. Biting a curse sufficient to have him expelled from the seminary, Magnus circumnavigated his pond and made his way down the aisle, inhabiting for a moment the scoured footsteps of countless processions of now-dead priests. The knock was repeated: three sharp cracks made with a heavy object. Magnus conjured the image of the leaden pommel of a sword until he remembered the hammer, cast in bronze, that was fixed to the left-hand door.

The boy straightened his shoulders before he drew back the heavy bolt. A wet cloak knocked him to the cold floor. The body rolled off him and lay still as the storm beat its way into the temple. Magnus struggled to his feet and put all his weight against the door.

By the time he had forced the bolt into place, the man had dragged himself to one of the huge pillars and was leaning against its massive carved base. He was a tall man, with all detail of form muffled by the sodden cloak, perhaps more than one, which he wore like a shroud. His breathing was heavy and Magnus could see the man was not well. Both of his hands grasped his stomach as if he had eaten very poorly and in the second pond made on the floor of the temple that night Magnus saw curling fronds of blood.

The man spoke, with obvious difficulty, his voice fine wine in a rough wooden mug. 'Kaslain.' The name of the Arch-Lector.

'Arch Lector Kaslain sleeps, as do all the priests. Might I find you a cot in which you could rest until they awaken?' Magnus was a good student and his lessons served him well on this occasion.

The man straightened himself a little and a flash of pain stained his features.

'I doubt,' a nobleman's voice, Magnus was sure now, 'I will see the dawn.' The boy could not deny that, from the size of the stream of blood, which was nosing its way to a drain beneath the altar, the man was unlikely to wake from sleep.

'Perhaps,' Magnus took a step forward so the man could hear him without straining, 'I might wake one of the other priests to give you audience?'

The expression might have been a smile. 'My last words, the confession of the sins of my life, are fit only for the ears of the Arch Lector.'

Magnus searched for the textbook reply but was interrupted.

'Perhaps it might help you, boy, if I told you who I was. You have heard, I presume, of Hadrian Samoracci?' The guarded but blank stare by way of reply convinced the man that he had not.

The man sighed and a licked a fleck of blood from the corner of his lip. The taste wasn't enough to carve an expression from the hard muscles of the man's face. He continued, the names coming out with the measured curiosity of a man more used to hearing them than speaking them: 'The Tilean Wasp? The Thousand Faces from Magritta? The Coffin Builder? There are other names.' Ah, recognition.

'You are he?'

'I am.' A pause. 'And I wish, before I go kicking and screaming into Morr's blessed company, to purify my soul of the stains which are upon it. Can you be sure any lesser priest is so enamoured of your god that he can grant me that absolution? And, boy, are you the one to deny the Arch Lector the greatest confession your cult has taken in his lifetime?'

There is a certain dignity, lent to a man, even a dying man, who asks questions which cannot be answered. Magnus walked quickly from the knave of the chapel and followed a route which he knew well but seldom traversed.

One must pause for thought, to find resolve for action, before waking the Arch Lector of the Temple of Sigmar at Nuln. Magnus waited for several long moments

with his small fist cocked before the door. The distance it had to cross was hardly the length of his forearm but any distance crossed for the first time is a journey in darkness. Magnus had to knock twice before a voice came from inside.

'Your holiness, a man is here.' The reply was predictably scathing and Magnus waited politely for it to play itself out. 'Your worship, it is a man of great import who asks for you by name. Even now his heartblood spills on the temple floor.' Over-poetic, perhaps, but Kaslain had a penchant for that kind of language in his sermons and Magnus took a gamble. The next response would decide the issue.

'Who is this man?'

Victory. Of a kind.



TWO LESSER PRIESTS came to carry the Tilean Wasp to Kaslain's chamber. The killer had drawn his hood over his face and Magnus's imagination couldn't help but conjure up the expression on the face which had looked on death so many times as he now went to face it.

As the almost funereal procession passed Magnus, the dark head lolled towards him and the faceless hole studied him. Magnus found something pressing to examine in the pattern of the marble. He had looked at this pattern many times, head bowed in prayer, and imagined grape vines, clouds, fish netting. Now he saw veins, like the pale cheeks of an elderly man.

Left to himself in the dying hours of the night, Magnus began to sponge the man's blood from the stones. Some had stained the mortar and Magnus scrubbed hard, removing most of it. His last act before retiring at dawn – he would be allowed to sleep until mid-morning devotions – was to open the temple doors to greet the rising sun. He stepped out onto the wide stone platform and fastened the doors to the walls by means of their hooks. Solid oaken doors.

Magnus was about to enter the temple and go to his few allowed hours of sleep when he was stopped by what he saw on the doors. The bronze hammers, usually fixed to each door had been removed, taken for polishing so Sigmar's temple would show no tarnish. He remembered the sound of the stranger's insistent banging on the door. He dropped the sponge and walked carefully back down the corridor to the Arch-Lector's private chambers.



KASLAIN PREPARED HIMSELF, but not as he would for any common final confession. The cult of Sigmar often received last testaments from dying men, promising them Sigmar's blessings on their journey to the land of Morr.

The ceremony was relatively simple but often the man receiving the blessing had travelled too far on that journey to understand much of what was said. Sometimes he had something he needed to say, a long-held secret which had ceased to be important to anybody but its bearer: an evil deed, perhaps, a disloyal act or a petty criminal doing. Whatever the exact nature of the event, each man amputated the memory and gave it into the keeping of the priest so the doing would not accompany him into the next life.

Kaslain had heard many sordid and foul acts recounted to him in this manner but they seldom made an impression on the ageing priest. He had too many such tales of his own to be impressed by the petty wrong-doings of some mud-spattered farmer or bloodstained soldier.

This man he prepared to see, however, was neither of those. What reckonings had he to make with Sigmar? Kaslain, dressed in his ceremonial garb and ready to receive his dying visitor, reviewed what he knew about the man.

The Tilean Wasp, so called because of a supposed mastery of the vile arts of brewing and administering poisons. The

Wolf in the Fold, or the Thousand Faces of Magritta – he had these names apparently because of an ability to disguise himself with consummate skill and infiltrate his victim's camp.

For this he was perhaps most famous and there were numerous stories of his duping this guard or that official. The stories were often recounted as humorous rhymes, idle entertainment, and each ended with a corpulent public official having his throat cut or his belly stuck. One could make jokes out of the death of fattened bureaucrats as few cared for them, but Kaslain knew the truth was more grisly than such tales allowed.

Another name this man had acquired was the Coffin Builder, because of the sheer volume of murders attributed to him in a career which spanned almost twenty years. Everything known about this assassin was premised with 'perhaps' or 'supposedly' and almost nothing was held to be indisputable fact. No one knew his real name and nobody could recognise his face for what it was.

That, thought the priest, was about to change.

The boys carried the man into Kaslain's private suite and laid him on a divan. The couch had been covered with a canvas curtain to protect it from the blood which stained the boy's white robes and bare arms in generous brushstrokes.

Kaslain, not normally one for humorous comment, was unusually buoyant, commenting that the two boys were perhaps alone in having received wounds from the Tilean Wasp and lived to tell the tale. There was little laughter as the boys retreated and Kaslain pushed the heavy door closed.

The man spoke before the last echoes of iron and wood had been swallowed by the woollen mats and velvet curtains. 'Father, I have come to make my peace.' The voice had a sheathed edge about it.

Kaslain steadied his own voice. 'You can find here what you seek.'

'I know it to be true. It cannot be given by any man. You alone, father, can give me peace.' The man's words were chosen carefully.

'You are a man surrounded by much evil but perhaps we need not speak of it all. What would you have my ears hear and my heart absolve?' Kaslain repeated the ritualised phrases with no greater conviction than was usual, but his body was taut.

'Father, I wish to tell you of how I came to kill a priest.'

Kaslain's intake of breath was audible and abrasive, the extra air stabbing at his lungs. *A priest!* He would have to deal very carefully with the dying legend on the divan.

The legend coughed and opened his eyes. The blood staining his shaven chin underlined the eyes which stared at Kaslain. So devoid were they of any feeling that Kaslain thought the man was already dead. The priest froze in mid-gesture, as if his slightest movement might push the assassin over the edge before the all-important absolution.

The man called the Thousand Faces of Magritta struggled onto one elbow and looked straight at his audience. 'My name is Hadrian Samoracci.'

Kaslain raised an eyebrow. If the man was who he said he was, that made him the son and heir of one of the powerful merchant-noble families of northern Tilea.

'My name is Hadrian Samoracci and I have been twice bereft. The first time was long ago and does not concern the matter of which I crave absolution, except in so much as it made me what I am today. The second time, however, the second time occurred in the autumn which is only now dying. Dying as I am.'



AT FIRST I THOUGHT her to be a farmer's daughter. A simple farmer's daughter covered with earth, testament to her daily exertions in the field. She had hair the colour of the chaff she spread before the swine on the manor estate of the man who owned her. I saw her beside the road as I rode up to the

manor for the first time and she fixed me with a stare which I did not understand – though I understand it now. Like knows like. Like knows like, and now she is dead. Such is the way of things and few think much about it. Just as the hawk preys on the hare and it is never the other way about, so the peasant works for the lord...

But I have not come here to waste my last breath on politics, and in truth, she was no hare. I have come here to use my last breath on the things that matter, at least to me. I have come here to spend my last breath talking of love and death.

I am a seller of death, almost a merchant you might say, or an artisan, or even a whore whose body is her only ware. I am all these things. My work takes me to strange places and I often have cause to touch the lives of the noble, wealthy and fortunate. Few men pay gold for the blood of a cobbler or silver to have a blacksmith's apprentice quietly drowned in the Reik.

The Count of Pfeildorf, a pole-cat of a man, maintained a manor house outside of the town of that name, for which he had nominal responsibility. A man had found me, found one of my men in Nuln and got a message to me: twelve ingots of Black Mountains gold for the death of the Count. The gold safely in my vault, for I never extend the privilege of credit, I travelled to Pfeildorf, adopting the guise of a trapper of wolves – a subject I knew very little about, though I was to learn more.

Once in Pfeildorf, I took up residence in a boarding house of roaches and wenches and went to work. It was a simple enough matter to steal a horse and ride out to the estate each night. The Count's personal security was extensive – a pole-cat but a paranoid one. His underlings were more accessible, however.

The Count's chief man, Castellan and gamekeeper, was a greasy pudding named Hugo. The Count's flocks strayed on the hillside while Hugo plotted to increase his consumption of Bretonnian cakes, or pursued some similar activity.

For four nights I crept close to the flock, stealing a lamb. I would wrap the struggling creature in my cloak and carry

it away so its noise wouldn't wake the dogs. Here my plan almost faltered for I could not bring myself to slaughter the animals with their fleece still yellow from their birthing. They were guilty of nothing. All my victims are guilty of something. Whatever you may say, you choose to be a killer's victim.

I left the lambs in my rank room where they consumed the straw mattress and soiled the floor, similar behaviour to most of the patrons of the establishment. Each morning I stood on a crate in the market and plied my new trade. A wolf trapper I was, on the trail of a rogue female, a killer from the north, a huge brute of a creature which had taken Halflings from out of their houses. I made the creature into a fearsome scourge for the whole district. Many farmer's woes were no doubt erroneously blamed on this fictitious blight and some even sought to hire me to rid them of it. My fee was correspondingly high, high enough that the poor shepherds could not afford my services. You may imagine that I found the work tiring but there is an easy calm in playing out my strategies and I find great delight in the invention of tantalising detail.

Eventually it happened. Hugo waddled into the square escorted by one of the Count's men. The duo approached me and, after a brief haggle over the price, which I pointedly refused to drop, engaged me to kill the wolf which had been taking their lambs.

I was given lodgings in the servant's quarters on the estate, a pallet on an earthen floor. I have slept in worse places and I have lain between silken sheets. My unique profession has given me the opportunity to learn about the way others live their lives, miserable and bleak, often before I take those very lives. Take them and break them. But I am not without compassion, as you will see. As I have said, I saw the girl as I rode in and her face stayed with me, though I did not know why.

My plan was simple: to range the estate making a show of setting snares during the day and to scout by night, and decide on the best way in which to gain entrance

to the Count's wing. I was to be there three days, no more. Once I have devised a plan I do not like to be distracted. Thus it was that I was angered by Hugo's rousing me early on the second morning and demanding that I explain the two missing lambs, taken the night before. All of my snares lay empty and yet the animals were gone. Hurrying because I feared my mock snares would not stand close examination, I dressed and followed the track up to the flock just as the Count was being served fig and pheasant breakfast in his feather bed.

I have some skill in reading prints in the ground and what I saw surprised me. In the mud near the stream where the flock drank I found signs of the abduction: here were drag marks to indicate the demise of the lambs, here a little wool caught on a thorn, here the prints of the shepherds arriving late on the scene – and everywhere were the indentations of a large wolf. The wind, already cold along the stream bed developed a cutting chill. I followed the prints until they crossed and re-crossed the stream; a smart wolf, this killer I had supposedly created. A smart wolf manifested from thin air and imagination. I could do little but wait for the night which is usually my friend.

I am not a man who frightens easily, nor one who is used to fear. As the night settled over me, as it fell gently to earth and blanketed the greens in a cobweb shroud, a bead of sweat found the scar at the base of my neck and settled there. Most foolish of all, this man, this killer who is scared of nothing, was frightened of a beast of his own creation. After a brief discussion with the shepherds, who informed me they had had this wolf problem for some months, and who, gratifyingly, were more scared than I was, I positioned myself in the low branches of a large oak which spread itself over the flock like a priest blessing the multitudes.

There was no question of my falling asleep. Such vigils are common in my profession and besides, the perch was religiously uncomfortable. I watched as the moon traversed the sky, describing a pearly slice through the low western horizon. Morning was only a few hours

hence and I had long ceased jumping at the shadows of the dogs, shaggy brown brutes from kennels in Averheim. It was one of these mutts who saw her first, however, or more likely smelt her. Even though she came from downwind, we could all smell her stench. It was a smell I have smelled before, many times. When a man is about to die, when he knows he stares death in the face, he has a certain smell. It is in his breath, or comes from his skin, I don't know, I am no physician. I smelt that smell that night on the wind. When I looked down from my perch she was there.

I have seen wolves before, but only in cages, rolling, barred wagons in the streets or in fairgrounds: 'Come bait the ferocious wolf, feed a mad killer with yer own hand!' She was a killer all right, but far from being mad. She moved with determination and poise. I slithered lower in the tree, silent as she, hunters both. Her approach put me downwind of her and I was almost overpowered by the stench of death which was her musk. As in an old Kislev folk tale, I had made a lariat from heavy twine and I balanced on the low bough, watching her. She was fascinating, huge certainly, but agile and sure-footed. I imagined her yellow eyes as I watched the muscles shift beneath her flanks.

She moved quietly towards the flock. One of the dogs found the source of the smell and loped over. The well-trained mongrel bared its teeth and crouched on its forequarters, a language that the she-wolf would surely understand. As soon as she turned I was ready to spring my trap. She did not sway from her purpose, however, ignoring the dog's threat, and I detected something strange in her gait. She was hungry like a wolf, certainly, but she did not crouch low as a hunter would, walking rather at her full height past the snarling dog. This was too much for the mongrel which threw itself at her throat, a studded collar wrapped about his own. She turned, acknowledging the brutal assault. With a flick of her neck, which might equally have been contemptuous or desperate, she flipped the attacking dog and snapped its spine

against the hard ground. Her unfortunate assailant yelped and rolled away trying to straighten a body which would never be right. I say 'contemptuous or desperate' because I could not read this strange creature, I had not the language. I should have sprung then and there but I waited, crouching in the darkness, in what could equally have been curiosity or fear.

The shepherds came then, with the other dogs. No doubt they wondered why I had done nothing, had not sprung my trap. Three young, strong men of Averland, armed with stout staves picked clean of bark during long, all-night vigils. Two more dogs, angry and frightened after the scream of their pack-mate. They would drive her off, perhaps before she took a lamb; anything else was unthinkable.

At the last minute I knew it would not be so, something in the way she moved, something in the unreadable curve of her ribs. I almost shouted a warning, but then I am no stranger to death, and these men were nothing to me. Besides, they outnumbered her. I have, I must confess, a sentimental attachment to the underdog, the lone wolf.

What followed was a lesson for a killer in killing. Again she waited until the last instant, turning as the two dogs came crashing in with their heavy skulls set in a charge. She rolled to the side and opened a gash on the flanks of the closest one with her bottom jaw, sending her victim in a scything skid down the stream bank. Before the other dog could recover she was on her feet and charging herself. She ducked under its guard and clamped her maw about its neck, spinning the animal in the air and crashing it sideways into a rock. The dog coughed once and lay still. The shepherds paused, fear and anger competing for their countenances. Anger won, as it so often does with younger men. They gripped their sticks tightly and strode in. The lariat hung loose in my hand.

She turned to look at the men and to my surprise she cowed. She looked away and lowered her tail, which flickered like a flame above her hind legs. The men rushed her and I read the signs an only

instant before her ruse was revealed. The first shepherd was on his back with her paws on his chest before the second caught his brother's hand with a wild blow of his stick. The brother screamed and dropped his weapon. He brought his hand to his mouth as if the benediction of his lips might heal the shattered bones. The second shepherd turned in time to see their companion's throat rent by the wolf.

She was magnificent. I stood as I might in a theatre, watching the players enact a drama of such intensity that I dared not shift lest I disturb their concentration. The other two stood together, defensive now, not believing what they knew to be true. She circled them once, slowly, and then rushed in, felling them with an axe-like blow of her head. The three rolled on the ground and wrestled but there could be only one outcome. Eventually she shook herself free of the corpses and spun her coat like a hound who has come in from the rain. I watched, knowing somehow that there was more to see.

The wolf had hurt her hind left paw and she limped to the base of my tree. My breath was caged in my chest and I strained to keep it there. She sat against the roots and shook her coat again. The moon passed for a moment behind a cloud, or so it seemed, and suddenly I was looking at a woman, or perhaps a girl. A naked girl at the base of the tree, her shoulders slick with blood, her left foot stretched up to her face where she licked a cut on the soft skin beneath. I had stayed silent thus far but on this transformation I let the night air escape from my lungs in a rush and gasped for some to replace it. The girl's head snapped up and our eyes met, as they had met before. I understood her gaze then, as I had not before. A killer looked at a killer. Like knew like.

In an instant she rolled and before I could say anything, least of all that I intended no violence to one so magnificent, she was gone. She sped across the field, once again lupine, once again perfect. I crept back to the manor slowly, avoiding the blackest shadows, shaking my head as if to dislodge the

images of the night from my memory. When I awoke late the next morning, however, they remained as clear as the day which greeted me.



AFTER THAT MY elegant plan had to be postponed and the Count's security was doubled. They found the bodies of the three shepherds and the prints in the ground were clear enough that even fat Hugo could read them.

'Werewolf,' he said, grimacing as if he had put his toe into a bath too cold to sit in.

What angered me as I stood there, not far from the tree in which I had perched the night before, was the man's demeanour. An assumption of superiority over something he could never hope to understand. From that moment I decided I was on her side: wild, frightened, perfect killer over fat, tame gamekeeper. After we held a solemn meeting about the best way in which to trap the ferocious beast – my contributions were fatuous and deliberately impractical – I went to seek her.

The farmers and workers on the Count's estate lived in a village outside of the walled manor, a collection of huts and thatched cottages huddled around the mill as if they wanted to take up as small an amount of the Count's fertile fields as was possible. I felt eyes regard me from dark windows as I walked up, stopping periodically to beat the sticking mud from my boots with a switch of hedgerow. She was not hard to find. I asked a few questions, not to be denied, this man from the manor. The answers I got were not co-operative but the villagers said more than they meant.

I found her drawing water from the well. She saw me and dropped her bucket, ducking behind the barn. I followed as quickly as I could and this time managed to say that I meant her no harm. She knew what I knew from the way I looked at her; it is always in the

eyes. She went inside the barn and I stepped in after her, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, divided by slices of light between the planks. I smelt hay and her.

The wolf's attack took me by surprise and I was lucky to have straw to fall on. She was on me and I remembered clearly enough the fate of an exposed neck to those jaws. But I am not a gormless shepherd boy. I brought my knee up into the creature's chest and gained my feet in time to meet another leaping assault. This time I pivoted on one foot and lashed out with the other. The manoeuvre cost me my balance and I once again tasted the hay but my boot connected with the wolf's ear and sent it sprawling. I leapt up, spitting dust and faced her again. She shook her muzzle, trying to dislodge the straw and a burr which had stuck there and I laughed.

'It seems we both have reason to regret this battle already.' I sounded more confident than I felt but such deceptions are my meat and drink. While we studied each other I was unclasping my cloak and searching the room for a weapon. 'Must we fight until one of us, most likely my good self, is cold meat?' There was a pitchfork holding up the thatch, wedged between two beams above my head. My pleading was having little effect and she lowered her head and crept forward into optimal pouncing range.

I watched her eyes; it is always in the eyes. Hers were yellow and savage, pools of amber malice, but there was a softness as well. I looked harder and almost fell into her trap. There was no softness, a sham designed to distract her sentimental opponent, accurately assessed by her predator's gaze. I recovered as she sprang. She was nearly quick enough, nearly, but I have been a killer longer than her.

I leapt upward, throwing my cloak in front of me and reaching for the pitchfork above my head. She flew head-first into the billowing wool and hit the ground awkwardly. As she skidded across the straw, I yanked down on the pitchfork and it came free. I crashed to the floor in a hail of straw and roof beams. The

bundle of cloak and wolf thrashed about and I dealt it a heavy stabbing blow with the butt of the pitchfork. I stepped to the side as a section of the roof sagged dangerously and reversed the pitchfork, pointing the four tines accusingly at my cloak. The bundle therein was now a lot smaller and I released a breath which I did not know I had been holding in when I saw the girl's head emerge from one of the arm-holes. I made sure she remained covered in the cloak. My taste is usually restricted to women of more years and greater curves but I could not deny a certain attraction in this case. Nevertheless, I am nothing if not a gentleman killer. We crouched together in a shaft of sunlight in the corner of the barn, she rubbing a bruise on her shoulder and me working the straw from between my teeth.

Our conversation was short but enough to satisfy me that she was more afraid of her condition than any number of shepherds or farmers. I suggested she might wander farther afield on her night-inspired rampages, or perhaps wreak havoc among the deer of the forest. It seemed she had little control and I vowed to help her. We decided to make it possible for her to leave the village behind, and live somewhere a little more remote. Why? I left the village asking myself this question, suddenly unhappy, uneasy even, with the glib phrases I had made to myself about a killer knowing a killer. Certainly there was that. Perhaps I saw a little of my younger self in her savagery and I wished to help her over the hurdle from random savage into refined artist of death. Perhaps I loved her, though I doubt that. I am not so deeply sentimental.

Whatever the reason, I had determined to help her and would have proceeded along the simple course we had devised, returning then to my employer's task. Except that things did not happen that way, holy father. Another character enters on the scene of this little tale of mine, revered Kaslain, and writes a chapter whose authorship I will rue until my death.

That character and that author is *you*.

KASLAIN STOOD QUICKLY, his heavy robe dropping from his knees to brush the flagstones. The killer on the divan looked at him.

'I have watched you as I told the tale and you knew from the beginning that it was your story, yet you listened. I had counted on your vanity, as sure a thing as any.' He smiled, mouth like a wolf's.

The Arch Lector began a brisk walk towards the chamber door, the walk of a man who craves haste but dares not reveal his need. He stopped in response to a noise from behind him and whipped his head around. The man was no longer on the couch. In fact, the priest could not see him at all. A large stain of blood marked that he had lain there and a soft red pillow of flesh, a kidney!

Kaslain stared at it trying to understand. His mind groped in an unfriendly darkness. The kidney was too small to be a man's – a goat's? How many times had he sacrificed a young goat to Sigmar on this holy day or that? He remembered the squeal of the squirming animal and the blood, always so much blood...

The understanding of the ruse came upon Kaslain slowly but powerfully, not to be denied. His face twisted in alarm and he spun around. The assassin stood between him and the velvet bell-pull which would summon his guards. He had divested himself of his bloody cloak and stood, whole and hearty, his face sporting a victor's smile. Kaslain lunged for the door and the killer dropped low, lashing out with the toe of his boot and catching the priest in the knee. The aged Lector met the flagstones heavily and rolled beneath the gilt velvet curtains.

The Thousand Faces of Magritta stepped forward and gave the curtains an authoritative yank. They fell, collecting in a heap above the struggling priest. The assassin rolled the priest with his boot, several times, until he was cocooned in velvet. He gave the region containing Kaslain's head a solid kick and the muffled cries ceased altogether. He then straddled the velvet grub and sat heavily. For a second, bizarrely, he adopted the posture of a knight on horseback, hands

on imaginary reigns and rocked his hips to the imaginary rhythms of an absent charger. This seemed to amuse him for a short moment but then his face turned serious. He reached into his boot, removing a short stiletto. The Tilean Wasp leant forward with this sting and began to cut a small window in the velvet wrapping. Eventually he exposed the Arch Lector's distressed face and made a warning gesture with the blade, telling the priest that he would end his life at the slightest cry for help.

'Your impatience is disappointing, Kaslain, and now you will not hear the end of my story. A story which you wrote parts of yourself, although I am writing this chapter, the last chapter in which you appear. I told you that I must confess how I had killed a priest. You are that priest, though I no longer have time to tell you why you must die.'



MAGNUS CHANGED EYES at the keyhole but otherwise stayed firmly in place, his back bent, his damp palms flat against the wooden doors. He watched the man sit on the Arch Lector and angle his knife. He watched as the man slid it into the priest's neck, muffling the victim's scream with a handful of curtain. He watched the man turn and stretch his neck while he looked about for his escape route.

Magnus had seen and heard it all and had not been able to interfere. He hadn't been able to move, until now. But when he began to move he found himself moving the wrong way, his hands on the handle of the inner chamber rather than his feet fleeing down the marble hall. He watched, as if he were still an observer, his hand as it turned the handle. He drew breath when he saw the chamber within as if he had expected that the keyhole might have been showing a different reality to the one which now greeted him.

The assassin sprang to his feet. He moved towards Magnus, measuring his

steps, all the time looking at the boy as if he were judging the distance between them so he might spring. After confirming Magnus was alone he gently closed the door and rested his back against it.

Magnus stared at the double line of blood on the curtain where the killer had cleaned his blade, until his concentration was absorbed by need to force air in and out of his lungs.

'The boy with the bucket?'

'Yes. Yes, but...'

'But you are more than that? Yes I am sure. We are each more than we seem.'

A pause. 'You are not injured.'

'So it seems.'

A breath. 'What will you do now?'

'I will finish my story. Isn't that why you came in here?'



VENTS DID NOT follow my script. The players had their own motives and each proved to be his own author. Even my own script might have been written by another. How often had I been distracted from my work in such a way?

Hugo had a cousin who was a priest of Sigmar. He came, a young wisp of a man with straw for hair and a child's chin. He announced that he would watch the animals by night and he would catch this killer. He had all the eagerness of a soldier before his first battle but he had something else also, the bearing of an officer, though he had no troops. We were his troops and he strode among us imagining that we bowed and saluted.

The shepherds laughed at him, having had little to laugh at in the past weeks. Hugo made an announcement to the effect that his own authority was extended to his young cousin for as long as the priest chose to stay with us at the estate. The priest smiled a tight smile and gave a stiff nod.

He stationed himself in the field on the third night of his stay. He had brought a tome which he consulted before he took

up his vigil, then he donned his white robe and strode into the night.

During this time I had not been idle. I had held two further conversations with the girl and each time she had agreed she would leave that night. Each morning I had discovered her, working in the field as if we had never spoken. I do not know for sure why she stayed, killing lambs all the while, but perhaps it was because she had found in me some kinship, some kindness which she would not willingly abandon.

We are complicated creatures and although I do not like interruptions to my plans I cannot say that I was not gratified to have her stay. I was unconcerned about the priest and here it was that I made my mistake – not that he was any danger to anybody, but it was his death which ultimately defeated my strategy.

They brought his body back, damp with dew and bent out of shape. No one had seen the boy die, the shepherds now being far too scared to share the night with the sheep, but the jaw marks left little doubt as to his killer. After that, events moved with an undeniable momentum. The Count used his influence to contact Arch Lector Kaslain in Nuln and appeal to the same sense of pomp and occasion which I was later to employ myself.

Kaslain came south with soldiers and Witch Hunters and they found her, as I knew they would. The soldiers went among the villagers with clubs and burning irons. Kaslain did not frighten me, though his performance had the desired effect on the peasants and staff at the manor. They bowed and scraped to his face and made furtive warding gestures to his back.

Though their methods were crude, they were effective enough and before Kaslain had spent two nights in the manor he had her. I would have killed him then, but I was more concerned in trying to save her. Helplessness is not a condition I am accustomed to or one which I accept lightly.

Our last conversation had been held in the same barn as our first. I was angry, fearful for her safety and frustrated by her

stubbornness. She reacted badly to my anger and the meeting did not go well. I wish now it had been otherwise. I have never been skilled at recognising the actions of fate nor at accepting its whims. I tried to convince her in any way I could think of to leave but I knew it was for me that she stayed.

They came and found her and stuck her with their spears. She took three soldiers with her as I watched from among the crowd of villagers, head bowed and hooded. Her mother was there too, a woman with thin skin which showed the pattern of the blood as it flowed about her face. I never got to know her name. They lashed her to a stake and burned her at sunset. My helpless fingers dug into my wrist and I made a quiet vow.

The tattered body took some hours to burn and produced an oily smoke, which caused the onlookers to cough and shield their eyes. Kaslain spoke a prayer to Sigmar, an obscene stave full of polite hatred and self-satisfied gall, standing with one foot on the ashen skull. I killed a soldier that night, I don't know his name; it is not a deed of which I am proud. I took him as he slept and mixed my tears with his blood.

In the morning I gathered her ashes in a sack from the ruined barn and commended them to the forest.



MAGNUS REALISED that the assassin had finished speaking and he lifted his head. The killer was wiping his cheek with a corner of the velvet curtain, cleaning away what might perhaps have been a tear. He stood and looked directly into Magnus's eyes. The stare was not comfortable.

'So that is my tale,' said the Tilean Wasp. 'Here lies perhaps my greatest kill and I feel little satisfaction. You are almost a priest: can you tell me why?'

Magnus chose his words carefully, grinding his sweating fingers against each other. 'I do not wish, sir, to be one of

your kills, even one of the least. I have seen what happens to those who hear your confessions.' Dawn clawed at the crack beneath the door. 'Perhaps, however, I may venture, you have seen a little of what others see in death, or perhaps you know that you cannot but kill, even if you would rather love?'

A moment of contemplation, the time it might take for a tear to fall from an eye to the flagstones if there was such a tear, no more.

'Nonsense,' the assassin said plainly. 'I go now to pursue my lucrative trade, leaving you as the only one to have seen me as I am and live.'

'Why?'

'Because I may. You ask a lot of questions, boy.'

'I... I have another. What of the Count? He still lives.'

'I go to visit him now. What shall my ruse be this time?'

'Sir, how am I to counsel you in these matters, one who can even disguise himself as himself?'

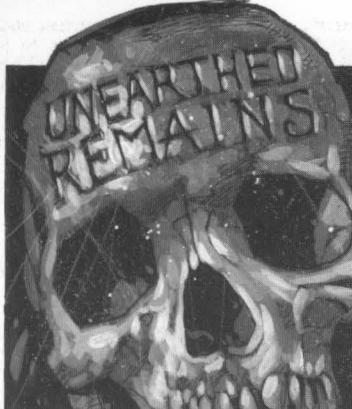


HUGO BEAT UPON the Count of Pfeldorf's door with fat knuckles. Two men were standing there in the late morning, the stone chamber which attended the Count's inner door consumed by their combined bulk. Hugo's girth was natural but the other figure wore the hooded robes of a priest of Sigmar, and judging by their ornate finery an important one at that.

'Awaken, sir!' the wheedling voice pleaded, Hugo a man trapped between two superiors whose wishes were in conflict. 'I would not disturb you, sir, so early in the day, but I'm sure you would wish to receive so esteemed a visitor.'

The answer from within a bark of an inquiry.

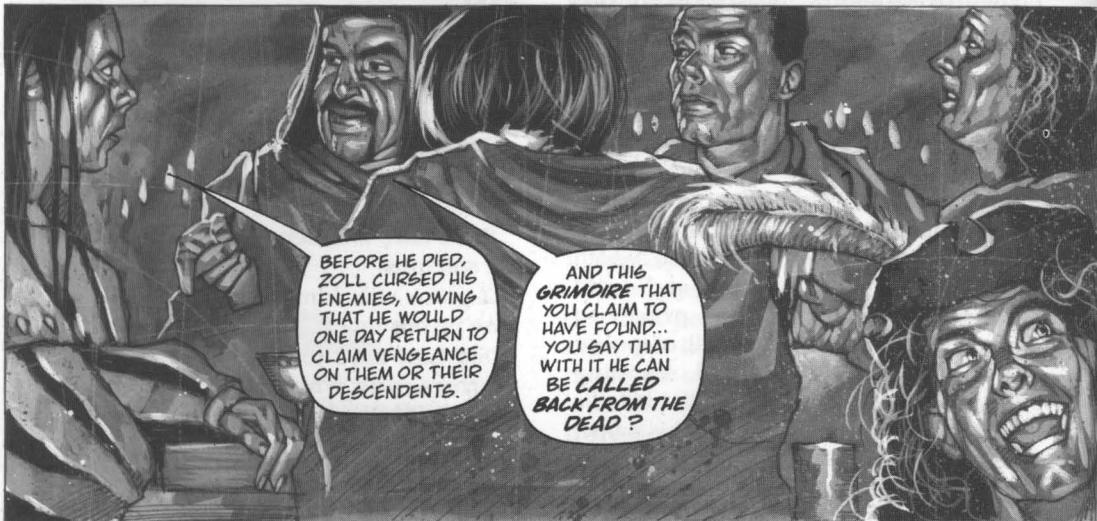
'Who is it, sir? Why Kaslain, the Arch Lector.' ●



'THE CHARNEL PIT', ONE OF THE MOST NOTORIOUS TAVERNS IN ALTDORF AND THE REGULAR MEETING PLACE FOR A GROUP OF BORED YOUNG ARISTOCRATS HELL-BENT ON FINDING DECADENT ENTERTAINMENTS --



...JOHANAS ZOLL. HE WAS A NECROMANCER DURING THE REIGN OF LUDWIG THE MAD. HE DIED AS MOST DO - DEFEATED IN BATTLE, THEN BURNED AT THE STAKE BY THE WITCH-HUNTERS.



BEFORE HE DIED, ZOLL CURSED HIS ENEMIES, VOWING THAT HE WOULD ONE DAY RETURN TO CLAIM VENGEANCE ON THEM OR THEIR DESCENDANTS.

AND THIS GRIMOIRE THAT YOU CLAIM TO HAVE FOUND... YOU SAY THAT WITH IT HE CAN BE CALLED BACK FROM THE DEAD?



LONG-DEAD SPELL-GRIBBERS, CURSES FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE, BOOKS OF BLASPHEMOLIS MAGIC. DO YOU HAVE ANY MORE TIRED OLD TAVERN TALES TO TELL US, DIETER?



NO TAVERN TALE, COUSIN ERICH. I'M SURPRISED YOU HAVEN'T HEARD IT BEFORE NOW...



AFTER ALL, IT WAS OUR OWN WITCH-HUNTER ANCESTOR, GOTTLIEB THE STERN, WHO BROUGHT ZOLL TO JUSTICE.



"ZOLL'S RESTING PLACE LIES NEARBY, IN THE OLD PAUPERS' CEMETERY. WHAT DO YOU SAY? SHALL WE TEMPT FATE AND THE WRATH OF MY ANCESTOR BY RAISING HIM FROM THE DEAD?"



COME ON, DIETER. WE'VE BEEN HERE FOR HOURS NOW, AND THE ONLY THING YOU'VE MANAGED TO RAISE IS OUR TEMPS FOR MAKING US LEAVE THAT WARM ALEHOUSE!

ERICH'S RIGHT. PERHAPS YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN HOW THEY LAID EVIL TO REST IN YOUR ANCESTOR'S DAY--



BURNING AT THE STAKE, AND THEN MIXING THE ASHES WITH SILVER AND LIME BEFORE SCATTERING THEM ON THE SOIL.

YOU'RE NO NECROMANCER, DIETER - YOU'VE PROVED THAT TONIGHT - BUT I DOUBT EVEN THE LICHMASTER HIMSELF COULD HAVE BROUGHT WHAT-EVER LIES HERE BACK TO LIFE!



BESIDES, IF I'M NOT MUCH MISTAKEN, THE CITY WATCH IS ALMOST UPON US.

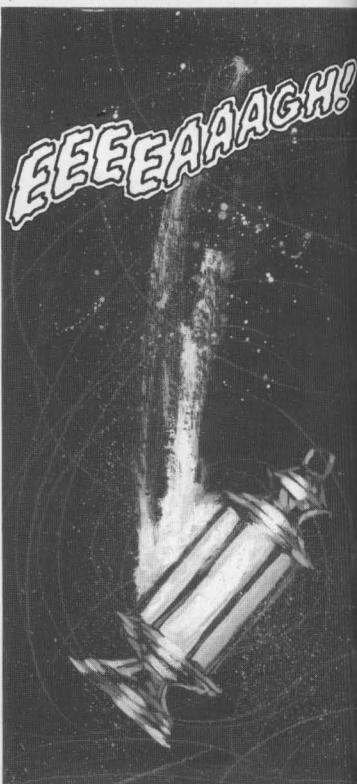


COME, MY FRIENDS. LET'S LEAVE THE WORMS TO THEIR FEAST AND GO FIND SOME LIVELIER PLEASURES TO AMUSE US TONIGHT.





...COULD HAVE SWORN I
HEARD VOICES...CAN'T SEE
WHAT WOULD BRING ANY-
ONE OUT HERE, THOUGH...



...SO WHERE TO NOW? THERE'S THE PIT FIGHTS IN THE CELLARS OF THE 'LAUGHING DWARF', AND I HEAR THEY'RE OFFERING FINE ODDS ON THAT NEW NORSE BARBARIAN.

WHAT DO YOU THINK, COUSIN? BLOODSPORTS AND SOME FINE BRETONNIAN BRANDY TO WASH AWAY THE TASTE OF THE GRAVEYARD?

IT'S LATE, ERICH, AND I'M NO LONGER IN THE MOOD FOR THE USUAL ENTERTAINMENTS.

HAVE IT YOUR WAY, THEN, BUT TAKE CARE ON THE WAY HOME, DIETER--

--AFTER ALL, WHO KNOWS WHETHER OLD ZOLL MIGHT STILL COME TO CLAIM HIS REVENGE!

WHO'S THERE? IF THAT'S YOU, ERICH, I WARN YOU I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF YOUR MOCKERIES TONIGHT...



DIETER! I THOUGHT--

AYE, AND SO I ALMOST WAS, COUSIN. OUR POOR ATTEMPTS AT NECROMANCY SUCCEEDED MORE THAN WE DARED IMAGINE!

IT WAS ZOLL, OR SOMETHING THAT WAS ONCE HIM, ANYWAY. WHATEVER, HE'S GONE NOW. HIM AND HIS DAMNED CURSE!

SIGMAR'S BONES, DIETER! IT WAS A LICH-THING! YOU'RE LUCKY TO BE ALIVE!

I'LL BE FINE, ERICH. IN FACT, I'VE NEVER FELT MORE ALIVE. I THINK I WILL JOIN YOU AT THE 'LAUGHING DWARF' AFTER ALL.

"Take ye care when dealing with the Necromancer, for his black soul survives bodily destruction and, if called back, may take new and horrid shape even from the very carrion of the grave."

IT'S BEEN A BAD BUSINESS AND, AS YOU SUGGESTED EARLIER, I NEED SOMETHING TO WASH AWAY THE TASTE OF THE GRAVE.

"But even his Deathless Will cannot long bind this unholy form together and he must soon take again the form of human flesh, the better to carry on his blasphemous work."

-Gottlieb the Stern,
Treatise Necris



THE LAKE

by Tully R. Summers

LORD ORL LOOKED down at the viscous purple slime lapping at the side of the skiff in the light from the sputtering flares. He spat in disgust, thinking of the sorry chain of events which had brought him to such a humiliating endeavour.

He had started his gang, the Brassers, with the grand intent of becoming the first Orlock Slag Lord of the Underhive. Centuries of mineral-laden chemwaste and solidified sludge lay hidden in the bowels of the Hive, just waiting for a man of will and vision to take it and turn it into the foundations of an empire. The House of Iron would echo with the name of Lord Orl. The fat, preening Metal Barons of Upperhive would bow and scrape before him, once he had completed his conquest. A fine vision, though easier said than done.

True, his band of highly disciplined men had taken their first slag pile with ease. Red's Tower, a huge stalagmite of compacted ore, had been wrested from a barbarian Goliath gang, the Black Hand. The yellow metal mined from the Tower had proved perfect for making clothing, gear and equipment, thus giving name to his crew: the Brassers.

But Black Hand's retaliation had been brutal. Months of bitter fighting had reduced the Brassers to a handful, and left Orl with a pitiful stash of credits. Then the blasted Hive decided to settle, one of the ancient subterranean domes crumbling under the weight of nine miles of vertical Spire. The resulting quake dislodged house-sized chunks of concrete onto the Brassers' water still, crushing the gang's only means of survival. Without water for his gang, and without enough credits to buy a new still, Orl's dreams had been flattened like the sails of the vapour collector.

Then came the Guilder.

Rorget Ahn was a devious but powerful merchant lord, known widely for hiring the many gangs of the Underhive levels to carry out his dubious business transactions. Lord Orl had long before vowed that the Brassers would never deal with such a sump-snake, but desperation now demanded he break his word.

Rorget Ahn had found a new dome. The very same Hive quake that had brought ruin to the Brassers had opened a tunnel to a deeper part of the ancient city that had been closed for untold centuries. A dome, completely filled with liquid, a virtual lake. A lake filled with mulk spiders.

Rorget's plan was simple: the Brassers would go spider hunting. They would harvest the gem-like eyes from the mutant arachnids and bring them back to the Guilder. The fortune gained by fencing the jewels through Rorget's uphive contacts would be split with the Brassers. Orl could buy his new water still and have plenty of creds left to revive his atrophied gang. It wasn't much, but it was a plan.

SO HERE HE WAS – Lord Orl, future Slag Lord of the Underhive, bobbing across the surface of a stinking slime lake like some sump-sucking algae farmer. He turned to regard Kar, in the rear of the fungus-wood boat. Kar, one of Rorget's hired guns, had been sent along to make sure all harvested spider eyes were accounted for. The grizzled, white-haired warrior at the rudder coughed and sputtered, choking on noxious green smoke as the little outboard motor burnt its fermented algae fuel. Orl almost laughed aloud as Kar activated the mechanical counter on his wrist.

'I'm not the only one Rorget's demeaned, bean-counter,' Orl sneered, pulling his patched mesh-link overcoat around him.

Kar glared back in silent resentment, eyes dark and murderous, and Orl turned his gaze back to the lake-filled dome around him. Behind him, lurching through the purple ooze were the other two boats. R'daff, his trusted second-in-command, Husker, Ferren and Hack were all straining sweatily at their oars. Orl hadn't had enough money to buy more than one motor. He spat again into the lake. That was the worst part. Rorget had made them pay, actually pay for these rickety fungus-wood rowing boats, barely big enough for two men. The conniving Guilder had taken him for every one of his last measly credits.

Still, better these bath tubs than trying to swim in this filth, Orl thought sourly, regarding the stinking substance filling the dome.

It was unlike any effluent he had ever seen, even down here in the depths of Underhive. Its purple surface rippled constantly in strange oily patterns, as if the liquid had a life of its own. The dome itself was relatively small, less than half a mile across. The intricate metalwork traceries that covered its looming walls were incredibly ancient. He had seen their like before, these vast metallic webs built from what looked like the skeletons of millions of extinct metal insects, shattered remnants of the myth-shrouded founders of the Hive. The technology to make such walls and machinery had all but vanished along with the memory of their makers.

Orl found himself wondering what lay beneath the purple surface of the lake. Up ahead, the end of some vast machine jutted from the ooze. Solidified chemical deposits encrusted what seemed to be the top of an enormous tube-covered tank, creating a small island in the centre of the lake, possibly the source of the flood that had filled the dome.

'Spider sign!' R'daff's shouted warning came from behind. Twenty feet away from Orl's flimsy boat, the surface of the lake was boiling in the flickering flare-light. Kar veered the skiff toward the disturbance as Lord Orl knelt up in the prow, pumping a shell into the chamber of his shotgun with shaking fingers.

The bubbling surface parted, almost like an eye opening. Glistening purple chitin

emerged amidst flailing, many-jointed legs, and the air filled with an eerie wailing like a dying infant. Flat, paddle-like limbs slapped the water as they propelled the nightmare creature swiftly towards the skiff, razor sharp mouth parts clicking hungrily. A virulent purple spray fountained beside the creature as Orl's first shot went wide. The shotgun's recoil rocked the skiff dangerously. Kar fought with the rudder, struggling to control the craft as Lord Orl chambered another shell. Before he could slam it home, the immense, reeking monster was upon them, crawling up the side of the boat, blade-tipped legs clawing into the wood.

Orl jammed the barrel of his shotgun into the slavering jaws and pulled the trigger. Chitin flew apart in a rain of blue-black blood as the creature blew inside out and fell back into the slime.

Orl stared at the floating carcass. A spider maybe, but not any kind of mulk spider he'd ever seen, and he had seen many. Its body was strangely asymmetrical. External gills fanned out along the sides of its ragged abdomen, along with a number of other unidentifiable fleshy appendages. But the eyes were there, five glistening black jewels staring from its dead thorax.

As Orl cut the diamond-hard gems from the spider with the curved knife he had brought along for just such a purpose, Kar's mechanical counter ticked five times. Behind them more strange wailing echoed it across the darkness. Three more of the creatures came to the surface, buoyed by the air trapped in their external gills. Orl saw that the same weird asymmetry had warped these in other ways. Though presumably of the same strain, each animal was drastically different from its fellow. Autogun fire mixed with searing laser blasts as R'daff and Ferren entered the hunt, their partners rowing wildly.

Another spider flew apart in a black splash as Ferren's laspistol hit home. Ooze kicked up around R'daff's spider as it scuttled towards them in a hail of lead. An orifice under its belly suddenly jetted a stream of liquid in a convulsive spasm that sent the creature hurtling inside their boat. R'daff tumbled to the deck, a tangle of slashing legs on top of him. Dropping his oars, Husker fumbled the stub pistol from his holster. R'daff screams mixed with that of the spider's as bone scythes sliced into his

flesh. Husker's stub shells smashed into the creature, hurling it overboard.

R'daff, blood flowing from many cuts, rose shakily to his feet. A severed chitinous leg hung from his shoulder, its bone hook still embedded in flesh. R'daff gritted his teeth and wrenched the still twitching member out, tossing it overboard in disgust. It sank into the mire.

All three spiders lay dead, the Brassers bringing the boats along side to carve their booty from their hides. Kar's counter dutifully clicked away.

'Head on back and get those taken care of. We'll finish up here,' Orl commanded, waving at R'daff's seeping wounds.

'What? These scratches?' R'daff panted back, smiling through bloody lips.

Orl shouted back fondly, admiring the warrior's bravado: 'Row his rump home, Husker, before he catches spore-' Orl screamed wildly as his shoulder exploded, spattering Kar with blood and gristle.

'Hey, lads! Looks like them sissy Orlocks are tryin' to jump our claim!'

Lord Orl spun to the hated voice, clutching his ruined arm, face white. 'Krug!' he roared, his voice breaking with pain and rage, 'You Helmaur-damned sump-slug, this is our claim! Guilder sanctioned! Show him, Ka-'

He stopped his bellow in mid sentence, gawking in disbelief at the sight of the leader of the Black Hand gang standing on the prow of a large, algae-powered garbage scow - the very same garbage scow Rorget had tried to sell him two days earlier. Lord Orl had opted for the three fungus-wood skiffs instead, fearing the seaworthiness of the pressed bonemeal hull of the scow.

'That double-crossing bastard...' Orl muttered darkly, as the firefight blew apart the semi-darkness of the flooded dome.

Lasers, bolts and bullets churned the lake into purple froth as both gangs fought for ownership of the hunting grounds. The Brassers' three skiffs made difficult targets, positioned behind the centre islet for cover. The whole Black Hand gang seemed to have come on the garbage scow through the sludge-filled canal at the far end of the dome. Though they made a relatively easy target, massed on the deck, their numbers were prevailing, a new gun replacing every one that the Brassers downed.

Autopistol slugs tore into Ferren's thigh, almost pitching him overboard. Chips of

fungus-wood flew as the Goliath's fire slowly ate the Brassers' skiffs from under them. Then the withering rain stopped, replaced by alarmed shouts.

Lord Orl raised his head from the deck. The garbage scow was melting. The bonemeal hull was slowly dissolving in the viscous purple slime, affirming Orl's choice of boat purchase. The Black Hand frantically scurried about the softening craft, jamming its motors into reverse and desperately trying to keep it afloat. Lord Orl breathed a sigh of relief as the scow turned back and disappeared into the canal from which it had come, the Black Hand making a last ditch effort to reach dry land before they sank.

A scream from the back of the skiff cut Orl's reverie short. Another mutant spider had leapt out of the lake onto Kar, attaching itself to his flesh with its bone hooks. Orl watched in horror as saw-like mouth parts chewed through Kar's face. Kar's gun went off in his convulsing fingers, the plasma beam hitting the fuel tank of the outboard. The vast, flaming green explosion obliterated the skiff.

ORL SWAM DESPERATELY for the surface with awkward strokes, crimson clouds trailing from his limp left arm. Somewhere below him, his shotgun sank down into the viscous darkness. The mysterious liquid was like hot needles on his skin, fire in his mouth, and razors in the wound of his shoulder.

His head broke the surface. Kar's body bobbed beside him amidst pieces of the skiff. Ten feet away, through stinging, slime-clogged eyes, Orl could make out the misshapen hump of the island.

Something jerked Kar's body beneath the purple murk. One moment it was there, the next it was gone. Orl began swimming toward the island, pumping his three good limbs with all his might. A fountain of bloody bubbles erupted where Kar's body had been and Orl redoubled his efforts.

Orl heaved his body onto the island's sedimentary shore, thanking all the gods he could think of that his skin was still there. The purple liquid, though stinging painfully, was not terribly corrosive; there were parts of the sump that would have eaten the flesh off his bones.

'Orl! Behind you!!' R'daff screamed in panic from across the semi-darkness. Lord

Orl quickly rolled onto his back to find himself facing the huge lake spider that was looming over him. Its sickening mouth parts descending toward his face, clicking like knives being sharpened. Orl's numb fingers scrabbling at his belt, desperately seeking the hilt of his knife.

Lead slugs from R'daff's autogun slammed into the creature as Orl's blade repeatedly crunched into its chitinous belly. The spider collapsed bodily on top of Orl, drenching him with its hot, black blood.

Husker rowed the skiff to the shore, R'daff leaping over the side to aid his leader. Heaving the spider's corpse off Orl, the ganger helped him gingerly to his feet. Ferren and Hack, in the other skiff, anxiously scanned the lake. The malevolent surface was calm, for now.

LORD ORL FINISHED prying the dead spider's eyes into the cupped hands of R'daff, grimly noting the absence of Kar's beeping motion detector device.

'Let's get the sump out of here,' Orl snarled, his men eagerly nodding in agreement. Both men boarded Husker's skiff, bringing the gunwale dangerously low. The Brassers worked the two gun-battered boats toward the half-submerged gantry from which they had entered.

Five feet from the make-shift dock, the shimmering purple surface of the lake erupted one final time, the dark blur of a spider leaping from the slime behind R'daff. In a lightning fast strike the creature's bladed leg hooked through R'daff's cheek, emerging again under his chin. Before the gang could even raise their weapons, R'daff was dragged into the ooze, vanishing with his attacker beneath the oily waves.

The rest of the gang flew to the gunwales, helplessly aiming their weapons at the slime, shouting R'daff's name until it echoed around the ancient cavern. Three minutes later they stopped. Nothing. No spider, no R'daff. Not even bubbles.

Pulling the skiffs from the hated lake, the remnants of the gang began the long trek home in mournful silence.

DOKKER FINISHED cleaning the end of the brachial vessel and placed the severed arm in the cryo pod at his feet. It had been eleven months since he had 'jumped the wall', fleeing the glittering halls of the Spire after that fatal surgery. Yes,

eleven months and no sign of the dead Noble's vengeful family, their lust for his head obviously overcome by their aversion to the teeming filth of the Underhive levels. All told, his new practice, cleverly located in an abandoned gantry crane, was doing quite nicely down here, with the ceaseless gang warfare providing him with a never-ending supply of patients and body parts for transplants. He had even come to grudgingly accept the moniker the gangers had slapped him with: Dokker Hack'n'Slash.

A loud metal clanging roused Dokker from his thoughts. He went over to the balcony of the crane, and peered over the railing. Four storeys down, he could make out the copper form of a Brasser, the yellow metal mesh of his garments glinting dully in the chemlight of the dome.

'Hack, my friend!' Dokker cheerily greeted the familiar ganger. 'More spare parts for me?' he asked eyeing the body Hack carried.

'No Dokker, it's Lord Orl. Something's wrong with him!' Hack shouted back in a worried voice. 'Let me up!'

Dokker hit the large red button beside him, lowering the ancient, winch-driven access platform to the ground below.

LORD ORL FORCED his eyelids open. The familiar plates of the ceiling came into focus.

'Awake at last, I see,' Dokker Hack'n'Slash's reedy voice piped from nearby.

'How long have I been out this time?' Orl croaked through split lips. His throat felt like he had drunk acid.

'Three days now, if the glowglobes are to be trusted.'

Orl turned weakly in the sick bed. His body felt like an aching lump of lead, and there was a searing pain in his left shoulder. He slowly moved his undamaged arm to clutch the throbbing wound. His fingers sank into the sickly white flesh like wet clay. He let go with a start, and was horrified to see the skin refuse to spring back, leaving deep trenches where his fingers were.

'What the hell's happening to me?'

'I don't know.' Dokker leaned over him, shining a light in his eyes. If his expression was anything to go by, he seemed almost amused. 'It seems to be some sort of extreme cellular deterioration. At first I thought you had advanced stages of spore rot, but you failed to respond to the anti-

fungal treatments, worse luck, and I can find no traces of fungal spores in your bloodstream.'

'Damn it all!' Orl groaned. Dokker prattled on, but the room began to swim before Orl's eyes, and purple-drowned darkness engulfed him once more.

LORD ORL. Can you hear me? Lord Orl?' Orl's eyes fluttered open to the concerned visage of Ferren. 'That rat-faced Guilder, Rorget Ahn, has been asking for you, lord. What should we do?'

It took Orl some time to untangle his muddled thoughts. The lake... spiders... eyes... Rorget Ahn!

The back-stabbing sump-slug had sold them out, purposely pitting the Brassers and Black Hand against each other. Profit, nothing but profit for the Guilder, selling his gear to the gangs so they could destroy each other. The weaker the gangs, the easier for the Guilder to control them. All this, plus the promise of impossibly rare spider eyes brought back by the survivors...

'Don't give him the eyes, Ferren, whatever you do, don't give him the fragging eyes!' Orl wheezed through cracked lips.

Ferren's face became more troubled. 'They're... they're gone, lord.'

'What?' Orl rasped forcing himself up into a sitting position. The way Ferren started back in revulsion did nothing to ease his consternation.

'They're gone, sir. They melted. The day after we got back from the lake. Melted away like ice.'

Orl shook his head in disbelief, pressing his good hand to his forehead. 'What the hell kind of spiders were those? What the hell was in that lake?' he asked himself, staring at the pus on his palm that had oozed out of the corners of his eyes. 'The lake...' Orl looked up at Ferren, 'I'm dying. Whatever's in that Helmwavr-damned lake poisoned me, Ferren, and now I'm dying.'

Ferren fidgeted uncomfortably. 'Word has spread about... what happened. The Ratskins are in an uproar. Seems they've known about the dome for generations. It's taboo. They say it's evil...'

'You don't fragging say?' Orl snarled contemptuously, then paused. A tooth had dislodged from his gums. He spat it onto the bed sheets in a gob of bloody pus.

'They say the ancients practised evil sorcery there. Sorcery brought from, from

off-world.' Ferren breathed the word like it was sacred. 'They say they made things there. Wrong things. Things contrary to the sacred Spirit of the Hive.'

'Enough, Ferren! Enough fairy tales! I'm dying. Let me rot in peace.'

Ferren slowly walked to the door. There he paused as if to say something.

'What?' Lord Orl demanded.

Ferren sadly shook his head and stepped out of the door.

ORL AWOKE ONCE again, but he was not in bed. He was crouching in the corner above an open cryo pod. He suddenly realised what he was doing and dropped the cold, dead hand that he had raised to his mouth. Waves of nausea shook him as he staggered back from his gruesome meal. He began to sob.

Dokker's cheery voice came from the back room 'Lord Orl? Is that you? Are you all right?'

Orl could hear the surgeon's footsteps coming closer, and his mouth began to salivate. 'No! No stay back!' he screamed and lunged out through the door.

He shivered as he lowered himself down on the access platform. On his way out he had seen his reflection in a polished metal wall plate. Huge misshapen lumps covered his body, pestilent fluid running from where the skin had stretched and split.

Dokker called after him from the balcony as he ran into the maze of tangled masonry, fleeing on cracking painful joints. He ran through the Hive's artificial night, the dimmed chemlights concealing his decaying form.

HIS HEADLONG FLIGHT ended hours later on the metal dock. The dreadful purple lake lay quietly before him, as if it was waiting for him. The skin of Orl's knees had sloughed off in the many stumbling falls he had taken on his journey. It hung in bloody tatters around his shins. The exposed bone of his knee caps seemed to have turned a sickly mauve.

His gaze fell on the dark island jutting in the centre of the lake. What's done is done, Orl thought, and leapt into the oily slime. Strangely, the liquid did not burn, but felt oddly comforting, filling the gaping wounds of his body with soft warmth.

Driven by some inexplicable intuition, Orl swam to the protruding machinery of the

island. He crawled onto the shore, violet liquid streaming from the mesh of his overcoat. Making his way to the jumble of pipes and steel before him, he began clawing away the solidified deposits on the face of the tank. Flesh flaying off his fingers he finally managed to break a large sheet of encrusted filth from the tank's surface. He stared numbly at what lay beneath.

Black arcs and crescents crossed on a yellow field. As Orl's ruined fingers brushed over the insignia it burst into life, flaring with ancient energy. His mind was hit with a jolt of terrible knowledge. Words and images he could barely comprehend flooded his brain as the ancient device pumped the memories of lost gods through his tortured nerves.

They had called themselves Gene Lords, and had plundered the known galaxy from frontier to frontier, collecting not ore, not gems, but the life-blood of every living horror they found haunting the abyss. There was something in this blood they needed, something for which Orl had no words. An infinitely small spiral, a twisted double chain they needed for some vast secret experiment that was far beyond his understanding.

That was it then, this lake around him, this stuff coursing through his poisoned veins. It was a vast alien soup, stolen from creatures beyond imagination, brewing for centuries inside this infernal vat, finally bursting forth to flood this age-old dome.

Turning from his mind shattering discovery, Lord Orl realised he was not alone. Dozens of the spider-things clustered on the shore in a rough semi-circle around him. They did not attack, but stood motionless, staring with their black jewelled eyes.

Orl took in their warped and varied forms, each so different from the other. This one with countless extra limbs, that one covered with dripping blue mouths that sucked hungrily at the fetid air, this one sprouting tufts of black hair and trailing a giant, rat-like tail.

Understanding did not come to Orl until the spider wearing R'daff's face stepped out in front of the others – or was it R'daff with a spider's body? They were all something else, all these spider-things, all originally some other creature that had happened across the lake. This alien soup had taken them, and absorbed them, just as Orl himself was being absorbed.

He was not dying, he was changing. He could feel it. The substance in his veins churning, shifting organs, changing bone to chitin, inexorably marching toward its alien purpose. No, the spider things would not attack him, he was one of them. Orl could feel their silent, beckoning call: *Come down with us, down into the sweet depths, down with us, where you belong.*

Yes, my new brothers, but not yet, Orl thought back. Fighting the desperate, all but overwhelming urge to follow the spider-things, Orl withdrew something from the inner pocket of his overcoat.

'Not yet,' he repeated aloud. 'I have something to do.'

RORGET AHN'S SUAVE, aristocratic features were knitted in concentration as he pored over the curling Guilder contracts laid out before him on his antique writing desk. The silken flap of his caravan tent blew silently open as if blown by a subterranean breeze.

Rorget was on his feet in an instant, shouting in alarm: 'Guards! Guards! Intruder!'

'Scream all you want, Rorget. Your guards won't hear you.' The voice of the dark figure standing in the door flap was strange, as if something was obstructing its vocal chords. The dim light glinted off the torn links of the figure's overcoat.

Fear flooded into Rorget's handsome face along with recognition. 'You can't kill me, Orl,' Rorget reasoned, pleading, sliding an ancient, offworld bolt pistol from his silken robes. 'You know the consequences of killing a sanctioned Guilder.'

'I'm not going to kill you, Rorget.' Orl charged across the tent on three insectoid legs, crashing through Rorget's portable desk and pinning the terrified Guilder to the floor. A scythe-like bone hook lanced through Rorget's wrist, sending the bolt pistol skittering across the floor.

'I'm not going to *kill* you, Rorget,' Lord Orl hissed again, forcing the Guilder's head back and withdrawing a small object from his overcoat. 'I have something to give you.'

Orl poured the contents of the glass vial into the Guilder's choking mouth. 'Welcome... brother!' he spat, as the viscous purple liquid slid down Rorget's throat. ●

UNKNOWN TO IMPERIAL FORCES
THE PEOPLE OF OBZIDION
HAVE BEEN HIDDEN BY CHAOS
IN THE CATACOMBS BENEATH
THE CAPITAL. WITH THE REBEL
CITY DUE TO BE DESTROYED,
TWO BLOOD ANGELS AND A
CALLIDUS ASSASSIN ARE
TRYING TO STOP THE
BOMBARDMENT.



ATOP A COMMUNICATIONS TOWER THE CALLIDUS ASSASSIN TRIES TO GET THE WARNING TO THE HEAD OF EXPEDITIONARY FORCES, LORD MILITANT COMMANDER BELARIAN.





ACCEPTABLE LOSSES

by Gav Thorpe

'CAPTAIN ON THE Flight Deck!' The assembled aircraft crews of the Imperial Cruiser *Divine Justice* moved as one. Captain Kaurl strolled into the vast hanger to the resounding clang of one hundred boots stamping in near-perfect unison on the steel-mesh decking. Walking two strides behind the stocky Flag Captain, Flight Commander Jaeger looked over his new comrades.

Most were dressed in regulation fatigues, standing smartly where they had been working or lounging before their commander's arrival. Jaeger's eye was drawn towards a particular crowd off to one side, towards the rear of the aircraft bay. There was something surly about their bearing: their uniforms were not quite so smart, their posture not so rigid as the other flight crews; their attention not totally focused on the newly arrived Captain. Instinctively, Jaeger knew that they were Raptor Squadron, his new command.

That explained a couple of things, at least: Kaurl's slightly amused look when he had greeted Jaeger earlier, and the glances from the other Flight Commanders during his initial introduction. So, the Raptors were in need of some discipline? Well, Jaeger would soon knock them into shape.

Jaeger realised that Captain Kaurl was addressing the flight crews and tuned his wandering mind into what his new commander was saying.

'...And I expect every one of you to accord Flight Commander Jaeger the same amount of respect and co-operation you gave to his predecessor, Commander Glade. Proceed with your duties; we break from dock at 0500 hours.'

With a nod, the Captain sent the gathered men back to work and turned to Jaeger.

'I see from your look that you've already spotted Raptor Squadron,' he said plainly.

Jaeger nodded slightly, keeping his expression as neutral as possible. One hand nervously stroked the eagle embroidered on the back of his new dress uniform gloves.

'They're not as bad as they might seem at first,' Kaurl continued. 'There are some damn fine pilots there, and with the right man in charge they'll make a fine showing. I think you're that man, Jaeger, and I'll be watching your progress with interest.'

'Thank you, sir,' Jaeger replied, pleased that the Captain had confidence in him. 'I don't think you'll have anything to worry about from Raptor Squadron.'

'Go and meet your men then; I'll see you later. Give them a chance and they'll prove themselves worthy of the Emperor's Navy.'

The two officers exchanged bows and Kaurl strode from the flight deck.

Jaeger took in his new home. Although most flight decks had similarities, each always had a unique odour, variations in layout and a hundred other small details which made it special. The flight deck of the *Divine Justice* had space to carry, prepare and launch ten of the massive Marauder bombers, along with a complement of ten Thunderbolt fighters. All of the aircraft were currently in their docking bays, each nestling in its own arched alcove along the sides of the flight deck. Above the Flight Commander's head, a labyrinthine criss-cross of gantries and steps hung in the distant shadows, centred around a pair of

enormous cranes capable of picking up and transferring the planes to the launching bays. The chatter of the flight crews filled the cavernous chamber with a constant murmuring, and the fragrances of the Tech-Priests' unguents and incense hung heavy in the air, mixed with oiled metal and human sweat. Taking a deep breath, Jaeger started towards his new flight crews.



AS HE STRODE across the flight deck, Jaeger quickly inspected his new men more closely. Despite Kaurl's parting words, he was not impressed with what he saw. They slouched amidst a scattering of crates, idly passing the time arguing heatedly, playing with dice or just sprawling around relaxing. All but a few wore loose-fitting, light grey fatigues, presenting a drab, uninspiring sight. Some of them turned to look at the Flight Commander as he strode briskly over, and a couple managed to get to their feet. One of them, a gunner from Jaeger's own plane judging by his insignia, pulled himself upright and snapped off a sharp salute.

'Fine day!' proclaimed the gaunt-looking gunner. 'May I welcome you to the auspicious role that is Flight Commander of Raptor Squadron.'

One of the others, a burly-looking bombardier, shot a murderous glance at the man.

'Shut it, Saile. The new Commander don't want to hear your creeping!' the bombardier warned, his sweat-beaded brow knitted in a glowering scowl.

'That's enough from both of you!' Jaeger snapped, irritated by their indiscipline. 'Let's get something straight right from the start: I don't like you, any of you.' Jaeger made a point of looking them over slowly. 'From what I've already seen, you are a bunch of shoddy, undisciplined, no-hoping slackers. Well, not any more!'

'You will address me as Commander Jaeger. Unless directly addressed by me, in non-combat situations you will only talk to me by first receiving permission, in the manner of "Permission to speak, Commander Jaeger?". Are those two simple facts absolutely clear?'

The men looked at Jaeger in stunned disbelief.

'I believe the words you are looking for are, "Yes, Commander Jaeger",' he prompted, eyebrows raised.

Their reply was quiet and faltering, but it was a start.

'Ahm, permission to speak, Commander Jaeger?' came a quiet voice from one of the men around them.

Jaeger looked at the flyer who was stepping lightly between the others to stand in front of him. He was swathed in the voluminous robes that marked him out as one of the Tech-Adepts, responsible for the mechanical and spiritual well-being of the planes, as well as the *Divine Justice* itself. The man's neck was criss-crossed with wires and scar tissue, and an interface plug dangled from the back of his right hand. In battle, the Tech-Adept would literally wire himself into the Marauder bomber, monitoring any damage and prompting the plane's repair mechanisms into action.

'Granted,' Jaeger said with a nod.

'As I am principally a member of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and only aligned to the efforts of the Imperial Navy by secondary venture, I consider your treatment of myself and the other Tech-Adepts as subordinates in a very serious light,' the Tech-Adept said, his chin raised proudly to look the tall Flight Commander full in the face.

Jaeger grabbed the man's robe, pulling him up until he was on the tips of his toes. The Adept's hood fell back, exposing more bio-wiring. The coils of thin cable sprung from his shaven head like metallic hair, attached to his scalp through a hundred scabrous incisions in the skin. Some of the others stepped forward but were stopped in their tracks by a murderous glance from their new commander.

'While you fly my planes, I am your commanding officer!' Jaeger snarled. 'I don't care what rank you have in the worship of the Machine God – on this flight deck and in the air, you answer to me! Make no mistake, I have every intention of turning this squadron into a respectable fighting unit. Co-operate and you may come through it with your lives and your rank. Go against me and I'll chew you up and spit out the pieces.'

Jaeger let go of the Adept and stalked off, cursing himself for losing his temper. But if there was one thing that Jaeger hated, it was sloppiness. He had seen too many good men die because of another's carelessness, and he wasn't going to let it happen again.



JAEGER ORDERED the men to stand down, pleased with their performance during the training session. As they sloped off to their communal sleeping chambers, Jaeger headed back towards the bunkroom he shared with the other three Flight Commanders. Jaeger wiped the sweat from his face with the palm of his hand, and was glad to be leaving the heat of the flight deck, warmed beyond tolerance by the bombers' engines.

As he walked down the corridor towards the Officer's Quarters, Jaeger heard the clump of boots on the metal deck and turned. Marte, one of his gunners and a veteran of many years service, jogged slowly up, saluting as he approached.

'Permission to speak, Commander Jaeger?' the man asked cautiously.

'What's on your mind, gunner?'

'Excuse my saying, but I don't reckon you're as hard-edged as you make out, sir.' The gunner was sheepishly inspecting the backs of his hands, avoiding Jaeger's stare. 'We – that is, the other lads and me – we were wondering how you ended up as our Flight Commander. I mean, what did you do wrong?'

'What are you getting at, gunner?' Jaeger rested his hands on his hips. 'And look at me when I speak to you,' he added, annoyed at having to address the top of the gunner's bald head.

Marte looked up reluctantly to meet his gaze. It was obvious that the other crew members had put him up to this. 'Well, getting stuck with Raptors,' the gunner explained quietly. 'I mean, you seem like you know what you're doing, so why did you end up in this dead-end assignment?'

"Dead-end"? Raptor Squadron may not be spectacular, but you're all competent, dedicated men. Why should this command

be so bad?' Jaeger asked, genuinely puzzled.

'So you've not heard the stories, sir?' The gunner's face was a picture of incredulity.

'I don't listen to rumour, I deal with facts and my own experiences,' Jaeger snapped, annoyed that the gunner considered the Flight Commander the type to listened to such gossip.

'Very wise, sir,' the old gunner said quickly. 'Look, Raptors get the worst deal, it's that simple. If there's some dirty work to be done, we'll get it. You must have seen the records, we've got the highest loss rate for the last three tours. That idiot Glade didn't help either, Emperor rot him.'

To Jaeger, the gunner was making no sense at all. 'What about the other Marauders?' he asked. 'Devil Squadron?'

'The Devils?' The gunner laughed, a short and bitter noise. 'They don't know the meaning of hard work. Flight Commander Raf is Admiral Veniston's nephew, if you take my meaning...'

The veteran gunner was shaking his head, as if his surprise at the Flight Commander's ignorance had reached a new level. Jaeger had had enough of being treated like a naive youth who had just earned his commission.

'You and all those other scurrilous gossips can rest assured that by the time I'm finished, Devil Squadron will be polishing our boots,' he promised, his voice hard, his eyes boring into the gunner. 'Remember, a crew is only as good as they think they are. Captain Kaurl is behind me on this: all you need is a morale boost and things will fall into place. Now go and get some rest!'

The old gunner hesitated for a moment, giving his commander a doubtful look, before hurrying back down the corridor, leaving Jaeger to his thoughts.

Raptor Squadron wasn't inherently bad, the Flight Commander mused. They'd just started believing the things that were said about them. If it was true that the Admiral's favouritism for his nephew was costing lives, he'd have a few things to say about that. For now, all he could do was watch and wait. And hope that things weren't as bad as they seemed.

THE EMPEROR'S BLOOD! That's a sight to set a man's heart trembling!' Commodore Veniston exclaimed. Only eight weeks into her patrol, the *Divine Justice* had run into serious trouble. Magnified on the main display screen of the *Divine Justice*'s bridge was a scene of utter destruction, the like of which the ageing officer had not witnessed for many years. The terrible wreckage of a Navy cruiser, what little remained, spun slowly across the stars. In the distance could just be made out the dark shape of an Ork hulk, the source of the carnage. One of the command crew looked up from the glowing green read-out in front of him.

'Surveyors identify her as the *Imperial Retribution*, Commodore. 80% structural damage – she's taken one hell of a pounding,' the crewman reported.

Veniston nodded. 'Aye, she has. And the question is: how do we avoid a similar fate?'

Captain Kaurl took a step forward, a glint in his eye. 'I suppose dropping back into the Warp and forgetting we found her is out of the question?'

As the command crew chuckled, Veniston directed Kaurl into the conference chamber with a flick of his head. Within the small wood-panelled room, the two were able to speak more freely.

It was Veniston who spoke first. 'Seriously, Jacob. How the hell are we going to take out that damned hulk?'

'The Tech-Priests made a long-range assay.' The Captain activated a comm-screen and brought up a rough schematic of the hulk. 'The bulk of the weapon systems are located near the front. If we could come at it from the rear we could probably give her enough of a pounding while limiting the return fire.' As he spoke, Kaurl drew his finger over the screen in a wide circle, to finish pointing at the hulk's main engine block.

The Commodore frowned. 'There's only us and the frigates, we can't take her on from more than one direction without being taken apart piecemeal. If she can bring her guns to bear, even the *Divine Justice* won't survive for very long. Just how do you suggest we get the greenskin scum on that hulk to sit still long enough for us to let rip with the torpedoes and batteries, Jacob?'

Kaurl rubbed his short-cropped beard. With the press of a rune, he imposed a series of arrows and notations onto the diagram of the hulk. 'Well, now that you mention it,' he said, 'I have had one idea. The Orks won't have a problem hitting something the size of the *Divine Justice*, but that doesn't mean they're invulnerable...'



THE ORDER TO prepare for launch had been issued an hour ago. Now the flight crews were hurrying to finish their last tasks. Jaeger's second-in-command, Phrao, was leading the crew in prayer, kneeling with heads bowed beneath the fuselage of their Marauder, chanting hymnals with admirable concentration. Jaeger looked up to where Arick, one of the dorsal gunners, was clambering around on top of the Marauder's fuselage.

'What's with them?' Jaeger called up.

Arick looked down from where he was polishing the twin barrels of his autocannon atop the spine of the Marauder.

'Do it every time. Supposed to bring the Emperor's blessing,' the gunner called down.

'I guessed that, but why beneath the Marauder? Isn't it more practical to do it in the open?'

Arick shrugged, although the movement could hardly be seen inside the thick folds of the vacuum suit he was wearing.

'Meant to bring the Emperor's power through the plane. You know the score, you must've seen other crews doing something like that before every flight, a special ritual. Like Jeryll reading out the Articles of War, and me polishing this damned big gun, though I know the maintenance crews have oiled it plenty since we got our orders. Surprised you don't do something like it yourself.'

'Yes... Yes, you're right, there is something I nearly forgot,' Jaeger replied distractedly.

Standing in front of his massive Marauder, Jaeger called for his crew to gather in front of him, ready for briefing. His gaze turned to the nose of his craft and

the gilded Eagle Rampant that shone from it. The design was repeated on the gloves of his dress uniform and printed on all of their helmets. It was the blazon of the Raptor Squadron. A fine name, but was it a fine crew?

As his crew congregated, he looked at each of them in turn. Over the two months that had passed since leaving the dock at Bakka, he had come to know the men better, although only real combat would show him their real mettle. There were the gunners, Arick, Marte and Saile; each had proved his accuracy on the simulation ranges, but word was that Arick lost his cool in the heat of battle, and Saile was basically a coward. Still, *trust not in rumour*, Jaeger's old Captain on the *Invincible* had taught him.

The Tech-Adept, Ferix, had been no problem since Jaeger's rough treatment of his fellow Adeptus Mechanicus at that first encounter. Ferix was frowning, however, as he climbed down from the Marauder's engine, obviously annoyed that his attempts to consecrate the Marauder to the Machine God had been interrupted. Jaeger would give him time to finish his rituals before they launched; there were enough variables to worry about without offending the Marauder's spirit with hasty ceremonies and hurried prayers.

The last over was Berhandt, the bullying, muscle-bound bombardier. For all his rough accent and large frame, the flyer had a shrewd mind. He'd have to be watched, however, Jaeger had decided, since much of the pessimism of the squadron seemed to originate from him, one way or another.

Once all five of his crew were present, Jaeger stepped onto an empty munitions crate that the servitors had not yet moved. Clearing his throat, he spoke out strongly and surely, wanting to instil his crew with the confidence that they demanded. If they didn't believe in him now, their hesitation or doubt could get them all killed once they were in battle.

'As you know, many bomber crews have certain customs to ensure the Emperor's grace and no bad luck. Well, this is something of a tradition for me, a little ceremony I go through before my first combat flight with a new squadron, just to make sure nothing bad happens – to any of us. Don't worry, it doesn't take very long,'

Jaeger assured them, seeing their distracted gazes. They wanted him to get his little pep-talk over as quickly as possible, and he could empathise with that.

'It's an old tale from my home planet. I come from Extu, in case you hadn't heard already – bit of a backwater by many of your standards, but we've a strong sense of honour and courage, so I'll not be running away from any fights.'

Jaeger saw nods of agreement from Marte and Arick. The others shuffled their feet uneasily, embarrassed by being told a story. Not all cultures were like the one on Extu, Jaeger knew; in some societies tales were seen as childish rather than important teachings for adults and children alike. Though he sometimes cursed others for their ridiculous habits or customs, in his years of service in the Imperial Navy, Jaeger had learnt to accept all manner of viewpoints and outlooks on life.

'Anyway, to my tale, as told to me by Faith-Sayer Gunthe. It tells of the great Emperor Eagle, whose claws are sheathed with fire and whose eyes are all-seeing – and of how he banished the Chaos Serpent from our realm. One day, the Chaos Serpent, the eternal enemy of the Emperor Eagle, steals one of the sacred eggs from the Emperor Eagle's nest whilst he is away hunting. The Chaos Serpent takes the egg back to her lair, and wraps herself about the egg to keep it warm, to make sure it incubates. When the Emperor Eagle returns, great is his dismay to find one of the sacred eggs missing. He searches far and wide, but he cannot see the missing sacred egg.'

'Meanwhile, the egg hatches, and the young Eagle is welcomed into this world by the Chaos Serpent. "Greetings," says the Chaos Serpent, "I am your mother, you will learn what I teach you and listen to my every word." And the Eagle learnt the foul, twisted ways of the Chaos Serpent.'

Jaeger looked over his men, pleased to see they were all paying attention now, even Ferix whose own religious beliefs taught him to worship machines over human beings.

'The young Eagle's radiant golden feathers were tarnished with spite.' Jaeger's mouth twisted in disgust as he pictured the

fallen Eagle in his mind. 'His glistening eyes were misted with false hope and his claws were blunted by disobedience. All the while, the Emperor Eagle continued his search, seeking ever further for his lost sacred egg. At last, one day, he came across the Eagle, now fully grown, and at first the Emperor Eagle was glad. But as he spoke to the lost Eagle and saw what it had become, the Emperor Eagle became most displeased. He commanded the young Eagle to remain where he was and sought out the Chaos Serpent. He found the treacherous, false creature hiding in the shadows nearby, but the Emperor Eagle's keen eyes still spotted her.'

Jaeger half-closed his eyes, remembering the first time he'd heard the tale when he was a small child. The next part was his favourite and had served to inspire him all the way through his upbringing by the Schola Progenium and through his flight training at Bakka. It was this that had first given him the ambition to be a pilot, and when times had been hard, he'd told himself the story in his mind. Each time it gave him the strength to persevere through his hardships.

As the other flight crews had finished their pre-flight rituals, they had drifted over to listen to the Flight Commander's speech. Now all twenty-nine of them stood in front of him, gripped by his words. Taking a deep breath, Jaeger continued.

'Swooping down upon his massive pinions, the Emperor Eagle seized the Chaos Serpent in his flame-wreathed talons and swept the Chaos Serpent high into the air. For a long time they flew. "Why do you attack me so?" enquired the Chaos Serpent, in feigned ignorance and innocence.

"You have taken one of mine own from me," said the Emperor Eagle, "and twisted it with your dark ways so that it is no longer tall and proud and fulfilling its righteous destiny. That is a crime for which there can be no mercy." And the Emperor Eagle dropped the Chaos Serpent into the bottomless dark pit that is the Eye of Terror, condemning the Chaos Serpent to eternal imprisonment, agony and torment for what she had done to the young Eagle.'

Pausing for a moment for dramatic effect, he could see that the tale was having the desired affect on the assembled crewmen. The men were listening with rapt attention

now, and for the moment would listen to, and more importantly believe anything he cared to tell them. His own pride was inspiring them, giving them the confidence to follow him wherever he led them.

'The Emperor Eagle returned to his offspring,' Jaeger continued, his intense gaze meeting the stare of each of the men in turn. "You have been done a great wrong," the Emperor Eagle said, "made that much greater for I cannot correct it, but can only punish the guilty. There are no amends to be made. You are my child and yet I cannot suffer you to live now, twisted and malignant as you are." The young Eagle looked at the Emperor Eagle and the nobility of his birth rose through the filth of the Chaos Serpent's false teachings. "I understand, oh great Emperor Eagle," and the young Eagle bent back his head to show his breast to the Emperor Eagle.

'With one sweep of his flame-wreathed claws, the Emperor Eagle tore out the young Eagle's heart, burning it to ashes – for none can live that have been touched by the Chaos Serpent, not even the children of the Emperor Eagle.'

The sycophantic gunner, Saile, clapped enthusiastically; a few smiled in grim appreciation while the rest awaited his explanation with dutiful silence.

'For we are the talons of the Emperor!' Jaeger said, his voice deep and full of conviction, his right hand unconsciously making the shape of a grasping claw across his chest. 'Just as this ship is named the *Divine Justice*, so too must we be the instrument of the Emperor's vengeance. No mercy, no forgiveness, just the surety of *swift justice and sure death!*'

'Swift Justice, Sure Death' was the squadron's motto, and hearing it spoken so confidently, with such emotion, had a startling effect on the crew. Jaeger could see their anticipation, eager for battle like they had never been before. They had pride in themselves, for the first time in years.

'So, what are we?' Jaeger yelled, his hand now raised in a fist.

'Swift Justice, Sure Death!' came the replying cry from twenty-nine throats. It echoed around the flight bay, making the crews of the other squadrons turn in surprise.

Jaeger grinned, his heart beating fast.
‘Damn right! Let’s give the enemy a taste of the Emperor’s claws.’



JAEGER GRINNED AS he gazed out of the cockpit’s canopy and saw the rest of the Squadron flying alongside the ship’s hull, each pushed forward on quadruple tails of plasma. Beyond them, he saw the firing ports of the *Divine Justice*’s gun decks opening slowly, revealing battery upon battery of massive laser cannons, mass drivers and plasma projectors. Immense firepower, enough to destroy a city, if not an immense space hulk.

The comm-link in Jaeger’s helmet crackled into life.

++Thunderbolt fighter squadrons Arrow and Storm ready for rendezvous.++ The familiar voice of Flight Commander Dextra, given a metallic grate over the long-range communicator.

Jaeger flicked the brass transmit rune on the comm-link panel to his left. ‘Good to hear you, Jaze. Take up a diamond-ten on the aft quarters.’

++Affirm, Raptor Leader.++

As the smaller fighters took up their escorting position around the bomber squadron, Jaeger increased the throttle, taking his plane to the front to form a flying-V formation, with his Marauder as the arrowhead. The craft swept over the prow of the cruiser, looking like tiny flares of light against the backdrop of the immense torpedo tubes.

‘Bridge, this is Raptor Leader. Formed up and ready to attack; awaiting target data, by the Emperor,’ Jaeger reported.

Berhardt gave a thumbs-up signal as the target information was transmitted from the *Divine Justice*. The bombardier’s gruff voice gave Jaeger the details over the internal communicator. ‘It’s a point at the rear of the ’ulk, in the engines somewhere. Can’t tell what it is exactly, this far out.’

‘What do you mean?’ Jaeger asked.

‘Just what I said, sir. It’s just some co-ordinates, no details of target type and a notation that says the attack trajectory is at your discretion.’

‘Very well. Inform me as soon as we get further details,’ Jaeger replied, before addressing the rest of the squadron. ‘Listen up, Raptors, this is the real thing. No bickering, no whining and no stalling. I am not going to let you get me and your flight comrades killed. We’re here to blow things up in the name of the Emperor, and that’s what we’re damned well going to do!’

Jaeger smiled as he heard the laughter of the other crew members come over his headset. Sitting back in the pilot’s seat, he began to relax. It would be a while before they were anywhere near within range of the hulk’s considerable defences, and being tense for two hours was sure to do his reactions no good, not to mention the nerves of his crew. To occupy his mind, Jaeger went through the pre-battle checks once again. He ran his eye over the cockpit’s interior to check everything visually. There were no chinks or scratches on the tinted armoured shielding of the Marauder’s cockpit. The snaking, wrist-thick pipes that twisted from the control panel in all directions seemed to be intact, with no insulation breaks or kinks. The pressure gauges of the engine had their needles pointing comfortably in their green quadrants, and numerous other dials, meters and counters indicated that nothing was amiss. Jaeger tested the flight controls, worried by the stiffness he was feeling in the movement of the control column. A few gentle turns and rolls later and everything seemed fine, easing Jaeger’s suspicions.

Berhardt had told him that this Marauder had been almost cut in half by an Eldar laser during its last mission. It had been then that his predecessor, Glade, had been sucked out into the void, never to be seen again. Jaeger cursed himself for such morbid thoughts and to calm himself he began to think of his home world. Unfastening a couple of catches, Jaeger pushed his helmet onto the back of his head and closed his eyes. With a thin-lipped smile, he began whistling a hunting chant from back home.



VENISTON PACED back and forth across the command deck of the bridge, watching the various screens that gave updates of the progressing battle. As the *Divine Justice* slowly moved in closer to the hulk, the smaller Ork ships in its escort were trying to break through the cordon of frigates to attack the cruiser. They were having little success, and the one or two that managed to get within range were soon obliterated by the overwhelming firepower of the *Divine Justice*'s gun decks. The floor shook with regular throbs as the immense plasma drives pushed the ship towards the distant foe, bringing all on board ever closer to death or glory. One of the communications officers was muttering sharply to Captain Kaurl, while he glanced over his subordinate's shoulder at a flickering screen, directing the efforts of the escorts and fighters.

'Is there a problem, Mister Kaurl?' Veniston enquired as he stepped up to the Captain, trying to keep the tension from his voice.

'Not really, Commodore,' Kaurl answered, standing up straight to look the Admiral in the eye. Veniston raised an eyebrow in query. 'There's a wave of Ork fighter-bombers which has made it through the blockade. They'll be intercepting the Marauders of Raptor Squadron shortly. But the fighter screen should be able to protect our bombers,' Kaurl assured the Commodore, rubbing the tiredness from his eyes and running a thick-fingered hand through his dark hair.

'Send the Thunderbolts on an intercept course,' Veniston decided, looking past Kaurl at the display screen. 'If the Orks get too close, the bombers will have to slow down, and timing is all-important. If the Raptors don't attack in time, the whole plan will be off course and the hulk will still be fully mobile when we get within range. We can't let that happen, Jacob. It's already a terrible risk using such craft out here in deep space.' The Commodore's eyes narrowed as he considered the prospect of the *Divine Justice* suffering the same fate as the *Imperial Retribution*.

'What if a second wave of fighters comes up? They'll be unprotected...' the Captain protested, his voice suddenly hoarse with the prospect.

'If that happens,' Veniston stated coldly,

'then we shall pray that the Emperor is watching over us.'

The Commodore turned towards the main display again, indicating that the conversation was ended. Kaurl suppressed a grimace and turned towards the waiting comms officer.

'New orders for Arrow and Storm Squadrons,' the Captain began.



THEIR THUNDERBOLT escort had peeled away regretfully a few minutes ago, and now the Marauders were on their own. As Raptor Squadron thundered towards the hulk, more details of the battle ahead could be seen. A swarm of Ork attack ships duelled with the frigates escorting the *Divine Justice*. Manoeuvring just outside range of the Orks' crude weapons, the Imperium ships were taking a heavy toll; the wreckage of at least five Ork vessels was drifting lifelessly across the battlezone.

Much closer now, the hulk was truly immense. Around it orbited a cluster of defence asteroids, floating bases crewed by the Orks and bristling with rockets and gun batteries. Some were simply pieces of the hulk that had broken off but hadn't escaped the pull of the hulk's gravity. Others, Jaeger had been taught in Command Training, were deliberately captured by the Orks, who used bizarre field technology to grasp onto asteroids and debris, purposefully creating a swirl of obstacles to protect themselves against attack.

Whatever the cause of their orbit, and whether they were just floating chunks of stone and metal, or had been fitted out with rocket pods or gun turrets, throughout the Navy they were known simply as Rocks.

As Jaeger considered this glorious example of understatement, there was a sudden hiss of escaping gas and the control stick in his left hand started juddering uncontrollably.

'Ferix!' Jaeger snapped over the internal comm-link. 'These damned controls are playing up. I need stability right now, if you don't mind.'

The small Tech-Adept crawled into the cockpit and took the toolbelt from his waist. Pulling a glowing, gold-etched device from one pocket, he set about the fastenings on a panel under Jaeger's legs. As Ferix unscrewed the compartment beneath the control column he began a low-voiced chant: 'To see the spirit of the machine, that is to be Mechanicus. To find the malaise of malfunction, that is to be Mechanicus. To administer the Rite of Repair, that is to be Mechanicus.'

Jaeger let the man drift from his attention as he looked through the armoured glass of the cockpit. The frigates had done a good job punching a hole through the Ork attack ships, leaving the way clear for the Marauders. However, something wasn't quite right. Jaeger's spine tingled with some inner sense of foreboding. Looking at the approaching hulk, a sinister suspicion began to rise at the back of his mind.

'Berhandt, can you get a fix on that Rock, five o'clock, about twelve by thirty-five?' Jaeger asked the bombardier, his unease rising.

'Got it,' the bombardier replied, a question in his voice.

'Plot a trajectory prediction, impose over our course.'

'Okay, Commander Jaeger. Metriculator processing right now. Coming through... Damn! You were right to ask, sir. We're heading straight for the damn thing!' Berhandt exclaimed.

'Avoidance course?' Jaeger knew that there wouldn't be one even as he asked.

'No, sir. Not with the time we've been given. Emperor's mercy, we're gonna have to deal with the bloody thing ourselves...' The bombardier's voice was barely a whisper.

Jaeger pressed the long-range communicator. 'Bridge, this is Raptor Leader.' he announced. 'We have a problem.'



THE BOMBER squadron banked round slowly, shaken by the engine blasts of the vast rockets soaring past. Each of the Ork missiles roaring from the Rock was

larger than a Marauder, designed to blow apart a massive starship but equally capable of wiping out the whole squadron with one unlucky blast. Crude faces had been painted onto the tips of monstrous rockets, leering grins and sharp-teethed devils seeming to leap from the darkness on columns of raging flame.

Jaeger was listening in to the comm-net, his mood grim.

++This is the Apollo, we cannot disengage currently.++

++This is the Glorious, unable to reach your position in time.++

And so it went on, each of the fleet's frigates too busy or too far away to attack the rapidly approaching Rock. Another flare erupted from the Ork defence platform in front of the Marauders, hurling six more rockets at the incoming bombers. Jaeger switched to the inter-squadron communicator.

'Split one-four, on my lead,' he ordered, his voice low and abrupt. 'We've only got time for one pass. Make it count.'

As an icon flashed green on the panel beside him, Jaeger switched frequency to listen to the incoming message.

++This is Tech-Priest Adramaz of the Excellent++ a tinny, unfamiliar voice reported. *++We have surveyed your target and established a primary detonation point. Transmitting the information now. It appears to be some kind of power source, which may destroy the target if you can hit it. I would make your departure as expeditious as possible though, we are unsure how large the resultant blast will be.++*

'Thanks, Adramaz,' Jaeger said, turning to see if Berhandt had received the data.

The bombardier gave a nod as the targeting data for the Rock's reactor was received and with the turn of a dial and a flicked switch, he transmitted the details to the other Marauders. Berhandt swivelled in his seat to grasp the forked control stick that guided and fired the Marauder's nose-mounted las-cannons. One shot from those could punch through a cubit or more of reinforced armour and smash apart rock with equal ease.

'Signature suggests it ain't laser shielded,' the bombardier said, smiling grimly. 'A couple of good hits should do the trick.'

Jaeger broadcast to the rest of the squadron again. 'Las-cannons only on this one; save your missiles and bombs for the main target.'

Phrao's voice came back first. ++*What do you mean 'main target'? Ain't this what we're here to destroy?++*

'This is just incidental!' Jaeger snapped back. 'Our main objective is on the hulk itself.'

++*You're joking! Five Marauders are going to as much effect on that beast as a swampfly biting a grox's backside!++* Drake chipped in.

Jaeger barely suppressed a growl before opening up the comm channel. 'We don't make the orders, we just follow them. If you have a problem with that, we can sort it out back on the flight deck. We've got a job to do, so let's just stay calm. We'll deal with this Rock and then we'll push on to our main objective.'

++*If we get that far!++* Phrao's voice, even taking the hiss of the comm-net into account, was rasping and bitter. ++*Damned Raptor's luck!++*

Jaeger stabbed at the transmit rune. 'Silence, all of you!' he snapped. 'Everyone listen to me right now. You all know your jobs, you've all flown combat missions before. So I'll hear no more of this "Raptor's luck". Is that understood?'

A series of affirmatives were broadcast back and Jaeger nodded to himself. *Doubt sows the seeds of fear*, the Abbot of the Extu Schola Progenium had taught him when he was young. *Crush it at birth or suffer the growth of heresy.*

Flicking his gaze over the control panels, Jaeger saw that all systems were working within acceptable levels. Everything was ready. He took a deep breath, his hand poised over the comm-link. Letting it out slowly, he touched the rune.

'Raptor Squadron, this is Raptor Leader.' Jaeger made his voice deliberately calm, even though inside his heart was racing and he could feel the excitement of combat beginning to surge. 'Break and attack! Break and attack!'

A DOZEN SMALL TURRETS swivelled into firing position and unleashed a torrent of shells at the Marauders as they screamed in towards the Rock, their engines at full burn. Dodging through the hail of death, now was the time for each pilot to prove his worth. Jerry took the lead, followed by Jaeger then the other bombers. From his position, Jaeger had the perfect opportunity to see the magnificent Marauder bomber in action.

They were huge metallic beasts, each weighing more than three battle tanks, with a wide wingspan. Designed for planetary ground attack missions as well as limited range space combat, the Marauder manoeuvred with small vectoring engines along the fuselage and wings whilst in the ether, and massive control planes and a quad-ramjet when they dipped into a planet's atmosphere. Nicknamed 'Big Brutes' by the flight crews, each Marauder was a veritable fortress. Its two dorsal twin-autocannon were capable of unleashing a hail of fire that could punch through the armour of enemy planes, while the tail-gunner's triple heavy bolters could fire a dozen shells a second at enemy interceptors or strafe soft ground targets. On the nose were the las-cannons for precision targeting, and six Flail missiles hung from the wings, each with a plasma warhead capable of creating a crater over fifty feet in diameter or cracking the armoured hull of a spaceship. For more wholesale devastation, the Marauder's hull also incorporated a spacious bomb bay which could deliver a payload of explosives or incendiaries.

As he contemplated the sheer destructive potential of just a single Marauder, Jaeger found his faith in the Imperium renewed. The Adeptus Mechanicus had designed this awesome fighting machine. The Schola Progenium of the Ministorum had given him the fervent faith to serve the Emperor. The Imperial Navy had taught him how to control this murderous creature of metal. And now he was here, once more about to deliver fiery judgement upon the heads of the Emperor's enemies. For Jaeger, there was no finer feeling.

As Raptor Squadron roared closer to the Rock, the enemy response grew in ferocity. With stomach-churning suddenness, Jaeger pulled up from the dive towards the Rock,



bringing the Marauder's nose level with the horizon of the small asteroid. Where a second before he had been flying in open space, now there was ground beneath him. As always, it took a couple of seconds to fight off the disorientation, and while he took a few deep breaths, he subconsciously sent the Marauder into a series of short climbs, dives and banks to throw off the enemy gunners. Glancing hits ricocheted around the armoured hull, filling the air with sporadic metallic clangs. A close hit set the plane shaking, and warning runnes flashed red across three of the control panels that covered every surface of the cockpit. Ferix's voice sounded over the comm in alarm.

'Armour breach! Check your vacuum seals and utter the Third Canticle of Protection, praise His name.'

Jaeger went through the routine of checking the fastenings on his helm, muttering under his breath: 'Deliver me from the void. Protect me from the ether. Guard well my soul.'

The bombers were almost within firing range and the fire had slackened as some of the Rock's gun turrets were blind-sided by the mass of the asteroid. A surprise burst of fire engulfed Jerry's plane, stripping away great shards of metal. Phrao's plane swept low, its las-cannon blasting apart the Ork gunnery turret, exacting instant revenge. Jaeger could see a gaping hole in the starboard wing of Jerry's Marauder, trailing sparks as severed power cables discharged their energy into the vacuum.

'Raptor Three, what is your condition?' Jaeger enquired urgently.

++Lost starboard controls, handling shaky. I don't think I can hold her, permission to disengage++

'Okay, Jerry. Break off and return home,' Jaeger said through gritted teeth

Suddenly the comm-net icons flashed for a priority message. *++This is Commodore Veniston. Do not disengage, Raptor Three; circle around and reform for attack on primary objective.++*

Jerry's reply came through a hiss of static. *++What the... Damned controls... Order received.++*

Jaeger watched as the lead Marauder pulled up, taking it out of the attack run.

Easing his control column left and right, Jaeger steered his craft through the shells screaming towards him. Guiding the Marauder over the steep lip of a crater, Jaeger saw the reactor housing for the first time: a crude conglomeration of twisting pipes and power relays. Berhandt gave a grunt as the Ork's power generator came within range of his las-cannon. Bolts of laser energy flashed towards the Rock, sending up plumes of smoke and dust. Berhandt's las-cannon spat forth another volley of fire, tearing through metal and rock.

'Emperor's blood, missed!' cursed Berhandt, punching his fist against the las-cannon controls.

Twisting in his seat as he steered the Marauder away, Jaeger watched as Phrao's bomber made its pass. As the craft swept towards its target, leaving a trail of swirling debris in its wake, two bolts of light struck the reactor full on, turning the generator's armour into a molten slurry and punching through to the highly unstable plasma chamber within.

*++Spot on!++ Phrao shouted gleefully.
++Pull away!++*

Jaeger's left arm ached as he wrenched the column back and right, pulling the Marauder into a spine-bending turning climb. Through the side-screens, Jaeger could see small eruptions breaking out across the Rock as a chain reaction spread from the reactor to the turrets and rocket batteries. Forks of electrical energy began to arc into the air and the reactor went into critical overload. A cloud of gas exploded through the Rock's surface from an underground tank, sending shards of rock spinning dangerously close to the following Marauders, before the gas was eaten up by a shaft of blue flame. Raw plasma spewed from the molten remains of the generator, pushing the Rock off its trajectory, sending it spinning further away from the hulk. With an explosion that momentarily blinded the Flight Commander, the Rock burst apart, sending fragments of debris hurtling in every direction. The victorious cries of Jaeger's crew and the other pilots rang in his ears.

'Steady, Raptors, that was just the warm up,' Jaeger chided them. 'Now for the real target. Form up; Jerry take the rear.'

++Affirmative!++ Jerryl responded.
++Where for now, sir?++

Jaeger grimaced to himself. 'Not sure,' he answered slowly. 'We haven't received full target information yet.' Damn it, he thought to himself, the whole mission briefing was hazy. This whole thing was beginning to stink, but of what he wasn't yet certain.

++Let's get this straight.++ Phrao's voice was heavy with sarcasm. *++We don't know what we're attacking, we've just got a deadline to meet. That's it? We just fly in there, easy as you like, drop a few bombs, fire a few shots and go home? Somehow I don't think it'll be that easy.++*

'Cut the chatter!' Jaeger ordered, his mood grim. He agreed with the other pilots, but he'd be damned if he was going to sow doubt on the command skills of Kaurl and Veniston halfway through a mission.

The Marauders roared onwards, the hulk growing ever larger through their cockpit windows. Its massive bulk blocked out a swathe of stars, looking like some lurking shadow waiting to swallow up the Marauders, luring them to their doom.



CAPTAIN KAURL coughed gently to attract the Commodore's attention. The senior officer pulled his gaze from the monitoring station and turned round, one eyebrow raised in question.

'We are in position to initiate the second attack wave, Lord Veniston.'

The Commodore rubbed one haggard cheek with his hand, gazing at nothing in particular.

'Sir? Shall we proceed?' Kaurl pressed.

Veniston's eyes were flints. 'Very well, Jacob. Launch Devil Squadron. Proceed with the attack on the engines themselves.'



WITH THE DEBRIS of the Rock scattering slowly in their wake, the Marauders headed onwards towards

the hulk. Pressing a series of runes above his head, Jaeger turned on a small viewscreen just above the front canopy, and a flickering, fractured image of the view behind the bomber crackled into existence. The Flight Commander watched as the *Divine Justice* moved in towards the hulk, its awesome plasma drives pushing it forward on twenty mile-long trails of fire. The two surviving frigates formed up in front of the Cruiser, ready to defend their capital ship against the few remaining Ork attack ships.

Jaeger could picture the commotion on board the massive warships, as gun and torpedo crews scurried to and fro, readying their weapons for action. He imagined the gun decks bathed red in combat lighting, the gunners sweating and cursing as they heaved power cells into place or loaded shells the size of his bomber into the breaches. In the torpedo bays, hundreds of men would be bending their backs to the chains, hauling the massive projectiles, ten times the size of a Marauder, along the loading rails. In the engine room, the men would be sweating heavily, the heat of the thirty plasma reactors permeating even through their thermal shielding and the crew's protective suits. He didn't envy them their task: hard work in very cramped conditions for little recognition or reward. Moreover, pilots were all volunteers, while many of the thousands of men who laboured in the depths of the fighting ships were criminals serving their penance to the Emperor, or simply unfortunate men taken unawares by the press gangs. And yet, he thought, everyone serves the Emperor, each in their own way. They will receive their due honours in time, whether in this life or not.

Something caught Jaeger's attention from the corner of his eye, but before he had a chance to look properly, Arafa was screaming in his ear.

++Incoming! Ork fighter-bombers, moving in on an intercept vector, closing fast. Where's our damned fighter screen?++

Jaeger was transmitting even before Arafa had finished.

'Storm Leader, Arrow Leader!' he rasped, throat dry with sudden fear. 'This is Raptor Leader, we need cover and fast! We have...' Jaeger checked the display in front of him

'eight fighter-bombers incoming!'

++Okay, Jaeger.++ The fighter commander came through immediately.
++We're on our way. Arrow Leader out.++

'Everyone, keep sharp!' Jaeger ordered over the squadron comm-link. 'Gunners mark your targets, watch for the crossfire. Tight formation. Don't let them get in amongst us. Drake, you're uppermost; cover the blindsides.'

Jaeger forced himself to calm down, loosening his white-kuckled grip on the control column. He kept his gaze firmly on the slivers of light that marked the approaching Orks. Now was the time to trust in the gunners.



THE ORKS WERE JINKING and swerving as they closed in on Raptor Squadron, surrounded by a cloud of tracer shells and pulses of laser light as the Marauders' guns opened fire. Each enemy craft was different, haphazardly constructed from crudely cut and bent metal plates, pushed screaming across the stars by hugely oversized engines that spluttered multi-coloured trails.

Each was decorated differently too: some painted in bold stripes of red and black or red and yellow; others embellished with Ork glyphs which were indecipherable to Jaeger; others still just a mess of jagged patterns and bold colours. Blazing cannons protruded from the nose of each interceptor and their wings were hung with bombs and missiles.

The Marauders were flying close in to each other, relying upon mass of fire to drive off the attack, rather than trying to evade the much more manoeuvrable Ork aircraft. Their gunners covered each other's blind spots, trying to keep up the almost impenetrable wall of fire that was needed to keep the fighters at bay until the *Divine Justice*'s interceptors could arrive.

'Got one!' Arick shouted from behind Jaeger, as an Ork fighter exploded into an billowing cloud of shrapnel and rapidly burning fuel. Then the fighters screamed within range, raking along the length of Drake's plane, sending splinters of metal

flying. A few stray rounds ricocheted off the shield in front of Jaeger, causing him to flinch, but the armoured glass held out against the impacts. As the enemy swept overhead, the dorsal guns on the Marauders swivelled to track them, spraying salvo after salvo of fire into the Ork formation. Through the armoured view panel to his left, Jaeger saw one of the craft caught in a crossfire by Phrao and Drake's gunners. The enemy's cockpit shattered, causing it to tumble out of control towards Jerry's stricken Marauder. As the bomber swung laboriously out of harm's way, its damaged wing twisted, until it sheared off completely. Lurching out of formation, the Marauder flipped madly out of control, and was suddenly in the centre of a devastating crossfire from the Orks. Jaeger averted his gaze, but in his mind's eye he could picture the lifeless bodies of the crew drifting out towards the stars.

With Jerry's covering fire lost, the Ork fighter-bombers closed in on the rear of Raptor Squadron, twisting nimbly between the volleys of fire from the tail gunners. The situation was looking grim: the Orks could simply pick them off one by one now that the formation was disrupted. If they just carried on flying straight towards the target they'd be sitting targets and wouldn't last more than a couple of minutes more.

'Break formation for dogfight!' Jaeger ordered. 'Drake, Arafa, circle round and get-'

Jaeger's order was interrupted by a message from the *Divine Justice*. ++This is Commodore Veniston. Maintain formation, proceed towards primary target without delay.++

Jaeger gripped the control column, trying to quell his rising fury. Was Veniston deliberately trying to get them killed? He stabbed at the comm-net button again. 'This is Jaeger. Repeat: break formation, take out these damned Orks, or we can forget about our target!'

As the Marauders pulled away from each other, Jaeger dragged his plane round in a tight circle, the control column juddering in his hands. Berhardt was crouched over the las-cannon controls, staring intently through the firing visor for a target. Jaeger spotted a fighter expertly tailing Drake's weaving Marauder. Jaeger brought his own

craft down above the Ork craft, glancing across to check that Berhardt was ready. The slicing beams of the bombardier's lascannon were joined by Arick's fire from above their heads. It tore through the tail of the Ork fighter and sending it listing off uselessly, fountains of sparks spraying from its ruptured fuselage.

The rattle of shells against the hull snapped Jaeger's attention to his left, where another enemy fighter-bomber was roaring towards him, its cannons blazing away. Something punched through the hull just behind the flight commander and he heard a muffled cry over the internal communicator.

'What's happening back there? Saile? Marte?' he demanded.

He was answered by Marte's deep voice. 'Clean head shot, Commander Jaeger. Saile's dead.'

Everything was anarchy. Jaeger watched the Marauders twisting and weaving, trying to shake off the much quicker Ork craft. The enemy was everywhere, the fighter-bombers looping around the squadron, unleashing hail after hail of fire from their cannons.

Arick's voice filled the internal link: 'Come on, scum! Yeah, just a little closer... Take that! Damn, just winged him! Oh, you hungry for some as well, filth? Emperor, these scum are slippery...'

Jaeger pushed the Marauder into a steep dive, the mass of the Ork hulk sliding across his field of vision through the canopy. He saw Drake's Marauder being tailed by a trio of fighter-bombers and realised the first attack wave had been reinforced by more of the Ork craft. Glancing down at the on-board scanner, he realised that the bomber's sensor arrays were damaged and hadn't picked up the new arrivals. The flickering amber and red lights across the whole panel showed that nearly all the plane's systems were in need of serious repair. Glancing over his shoulder, Jaeger could make out Ferix clambering about in the gloom, frantically re-wiring cables and sealing split pipelines, muttering prayers all the while.

Turning his attention back to the outside, he watched helplessly as a volley of fire from the Orks shredded the tail of Drake's Marauder. But then, without warning, the fighter-bombers tailing Drake exploded

into widening blasts of twisted metal. A moment later, three Imperial Thunderbolts screamed through the cloud of burning gas, their engines at full throttle. The comm crackled into life.

+ + This is Arrow Leader. We have them now. Break for your target. + +

With a smile of relief, Jaeger opened up the engines to full and flicked the transmit rune on the comm panel. 'Just in time, Dextra! Stay lucky and I'll see you back on board.'

The interceptors had punched a hole in the fighter-bomber squadrons, leaving the route clear for the bombers to proceed towards their destination. Jaeger banked his aircraft around to head for the opening, his eyes fixed on the huge Ork vessel ahead.

'Raptor Squadron, this is Raptor Leader,' Jaeger announced over the squadron frequency, trying to keep his voice calm, despite his trepidation and pounding heart. 'Follow me in.'



CHECK MISSILE AND bomb links,' Jaeger ordered the squadron. Behind him, Berhardt touched a pair of runes and frowned as they failed to light up. Snarling, the bombardier brought his fist down sharply on the display and grinned cheerfully as his face was bathed in green light. He looked towards Jaeger and gave a thumbs up.

'This is Raptor Leader,' Jaeger broadcast to the squadron. 'Prepare for bombardment of primary objective.'

As a series of affirmatives came back across the comm-link, Jaeger gave a quick smile to himself. They'd got through. Not all of them, admittedly, but hopefully they'd get the opportunity to avenge Saile, Jerryl and the others.

+ + Look at the size of that beast. + + Arafa's awed voice came over the ether.

'Less talk, men, stay sharp,' Jaeger interrupted. 'We've come too far to mess up now.'

Despite his stern words, Jaeger could understand the other pilot's feelings. The

hulk was truly massive, dwarfing even the majestic size of the *Divine Justice*. As the squadron moved closer and closer to their target, and the hulk grew larger and larger in their sights, Jaeger could make out more details. He could see where three or perhaps four different starships had been compacted together, forming outcrops of twisted metal, jutting at a bizarre angle from where innumerable other craft and asteroids had been compressed together by the tides of Warp space to form the central mass of the drifting hulk. It looked like a gigantic wedge of crumpled and torn metal and rock, weighing untold millions of tons.

How the Orks managed to populate one of these randomly wandering behemoths, the Emperor alone knew. That they could was bad enough, but when the green-skinned savages managed to activate dormant engines or build their own immense drives, that turned an uncontrolled, erratic menace into a dire threat. The bulk of the Ork vessel shimmered with the frozen particles that encrusted its hull. Billowing gases vented from unseen ports, creating a wreath of lazily-moving smog around the hulk's huge girth. It had a kind of savage beauty: a wracked sculpture of tortured metal that somehow seemed to be cleaving, almost elegantly, across the stars.

Jaeger's thoughts hardened. Inside that bizarre, sprawling shell were thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands of Orks waiting to devastate some planet; to spill across continents in a wave of wanton destruction and killing. He remembered what had happened to the Imperial Retribution and pictured Saile's corpse in the sealed gunnery chamber behind him. All thoughts of beauty slipped from his mind immediately. The hulk was a threat to the Emperor's domains; a stain upon the galaxy. It was his duty to destroy it.

Checking the targeting data scrolling across a small, dull yellow viewscreen just above his head, Jaeger banked the Marauder in towards the hulk to assume the best attack trajectory.

'Raptor Squadron, this is Raptor Leader,' Jaeger growled, turning over the attack pattern in his head. 'Praise the Emperor, it's time.'

THE MARAUDERS SPED across the chaotic hull of the Ork hulk, diving low to swoop beneath ruined gantries, swerving around twisted columns. With the Marauders this close, the defence turrets had little time to react to their presence, sending up a harmless spray of energy bolts and shells seconds too late.

Jaeger started to chant the mantra that would ease his mind into union with the aircraft he controlled. He would rely solely upon instinct rather than thought, he and the bomber acting and reacting as a single entity. As he felt his mind slipping into the semi-subconscious state he required for total concentration, Jaeger glanced over to see Berhardt hunched over the targeting screen, his fingers subconsciously adjusting the row of dials below it to get the focus and magnitude correct.

Guiding the Marauder across the hulk's surface with one hand, Jaeger activated a series of runes and the canopy in front of him darkened slightly as it interfaced with the Marauder's artificial eyes and ears. A false image of outlines and silhouettes imposed itself over the view through the shield; highlighting particular obstacles, bringing the twisted contours and angles of the hulk's surface into stark contrast for ease of navigation. Patches of static or blankness showed here and there where the Marauder's sensors were damaged or some interfering energy source was fluctuating within the hulk itself.

With Berhardt concentrating on the bombs and missiles, it was Jaeger's task to take control of the las-cannon. The Flight Commander reached overhead and pulled a lever. With a sudden venting of quickly-dissipating steam, the las-cannon controls slid forward from the control panel beside Berhardt, four clamps locking the whole control bank into its new position alongside Jaeger. Punching a pair of buttons on the weapon control panel with his right hand, still guiding the Marauder around the obstructions ahead with his left, the Flight Commander activated the las-cannon and the canopy display in front of him was filled with a swirl of static. Quickly adjusting the weapon's sensor array, Jaeger re-tuned the las-cannon's false eyes and the cloud of random specks coalesced into moving icons, highlighting possible target points. The blood-red rune

of their primary target stood out like a guiding beacon, a procession of angles, estimated armour, trajectories and other information scrolling rapidly alongside it.

'Raptor Squadron, sound off current status,' the Flight Commander ordered.

++Raptor Two, las-cannon's out, missiles and bombs on-line and ready to blow!++

++Raptor Three: all systems acceptable, by the Emperor.++

++Raptor Five. Everything's in the green 'cept tail retros. She's handling hard, but we'll be fine.++

'Okay. Assume attack vector Prime, standard diamond,' Jaeger commanded. 'Let's not waste our chance.'

Jaeger slowed his breathing, realising that despite his prayers he was becoming agitated. In a few more moments they would pass over the jagged outcrop of an impacted cargo ship and would have a line to their as-yet unknown target. A hum started in Jaeger's ear through the internal comm, as Berhardt wakened the spirits of the Marauder's self-guiding missiles and they set about seeking their target. As the bomber neared its objective and the missiles' surveyors acquired the targeting point, the hum became ever more high pitched. Tilting the nose of the Marauder forward, Jaeger led the squadron over the wrecked cargo transport. The unidentified target came into full view.

Like a bolt of unholy wrath, a ball of plasma a hundred yards wide swept through the Marauder squadron, engulfing Arafa's aircraft, leaving nothing more than a cloud of gas and globules of molten plasteel.

Drake was on the comm-link instantly:
++Emperor's blood! It's a damned gun battery! Why didn't they tell us it was damned cannon? What the hell were they thinking of? Aren't we attacking the engines?++

Jaeger saw that it was true: a pair of immense guns, each a barrel wide enough to swallow a Marauder, were pointing directly at the attacking bombers. Jaeger shivered with dread as he saw the scanner's read-out showing the energy build-up for another blast.

'Pull up!' Jaeger cried out over the squadron frequency. 'Break formation! Hit

it from the other side!' As he wrenches his own plane into a steep climb, he prayed that the others had reacted in time, as if he could make their aircraft move faster, make them react quicker, through sheer force of will.

As the Marauders dispersed, another volcanic blast of energy hurtled from the cannons, blazing a path through the space where seconds before the Marauders had been. Jaeger thanked the Emperor for his swift guidance, but inwardly he was cursing Veniston and Kaurl with all his might. Why hadn't they told Jaeger that the target was a weapon battery? How the hell did they think he was going to plan an attack properly if he wasn't made aware of all the dangers? Choking back his fury, Jaeger ordered the squadron back into an attack approach, fervently praying under his breath that the huge turret didn't have enough time to traverse and get another shot at them. At this range it could hardly miss.

With agonising slowness, the turret tracked around towards the incoming Marauders. The message *Deviant Perceived* flashed scarlet across the left window of the canopy and the whine of the missiles became an unbearable shriek.

'Fly, sweet vengeance!' came Berhardt's voice, quoting the words he'd personally inscribed onto each of the missiles as they were loaded.

A salvo of fire from the other bombers joined Berhardt's volley, a rippling wave of death that streaked towards its target on tails of flame, rapidly becoming distant sparks as the missiles sped towards the gun turret. They hit home with a deadly blossom of explosions and the viewscreen showed twisted chunks of metal being thrown in all directions. Escaping gases briefly caught fire in actinic fountains of flaring light.

The red target rune was still active on the canopy screen, shining bright just in front of Jaeger's eyes. He realised with sickening dread that the turret wasn't destroyed. It was still about to open fire once more.

'Las-cannons and bombs!' Jaeger ordered, pressing the firing stud of his own plane's weapons with his thumb, spewing forth a salvo of energy bolts. Debris and burning vapours exploded across the

hulk's surface as the lasers tracked towards their target, until the gun turret was at the centre of a storm of beams converging from the four Marauders. A warning sigil floated before Jaeger, showing the turret was in position to fire again. In his mind's eye, Jaeger could imagine the huge barrels of the cannons glowing with the suppressed energy inside, waiting to spit forth destruction and damnation.

With a blast that flung Jaeger back in his seat, the turret exploded in a vast, searing cloud of white plasma and billowing clouds of magnesium-bright vapour. Easing the controls back, Jaeger began to pull the Marauder out of its dive towards the hulk's surface.

Suddenly, Drake's voice was hammering in his ear: *++Control's lost, Raptor Leader. I can't pull up.++*

Jaeger watched as Drake's Marauder sped below him, dipping towards the hulk's hull, trailing sparks and burning fuel from its damaged tail.

Get out, Jaeger pleaded. Get to the saviour pod. He gave a heartfelt sigh of relief as he saw the midsection of the Marauder being punched upwards by emergency rockets, sending it spinning away from the hulk.

++Lost Barnus and Cord.++ Drake's voice was hoarse with sadness. *++Their link to the pod was blocked.++*

++Raptor Squadron, this is Veniston.++ The Commodore's smooth voice cut through the comm-chatter. *++Excellent work, boys. You can come home now.++*

Jaeger frowned to himself in confusion. How the hell did destroying one gun turret help the *Divine Justice* against this brute? As he raged, the answer appeared on the display screen far across the rear of the hulk. More Marauders were moving in on the behemoth's engines: the Marauders of Devil Squadron.

Phrao hissed bitterly over the comm-link: *++Trust those damned Devils. We do all the bleeding, they get all the glory!++*

'Not this time, Phrao,' Jaeger answered. 'Form up on my wing. Let's give those Devils a hand.'

++I bear you, Raptor Leader!++ Phrao replied happily.

AS THE BOMBS and missiles of Devil Squadron erupted across one of the hulk's immense engines, the surviving two Marauders of the Raptors swept low, their las-cannons picking out weak points in the armour, punching through buckled shields and twisted plates. Soon a dozen fires were blazing, and the engine ruptured with a swirling cloud of super-heated matter. Explosions blossomed across the whole section of the hulk and one by one each of the massive stellar drives lost power and went dim, leaving the hulk drifting without control.

As the Marauders sped back towards the *Divine Justice*, the cruiser was sweeping in victoriously for the kill. Wave after wave of torpedoes sped past; Jaeger adjusted the rear viewer to see the plasma warheads punching massive holes in the hulk's armoured skin. Gun batteries exploded across the Ork vessel in bright pinpricks of light. Fires began raging across the hulk's midsection, becoming raging infernos as the atmosphere inside the hulk pushed out with ever-increasing pressure.

As he prepared to dock, Jaeger got one last glimpse of the hulk. Unable to manoeuvre without its main engines, and helpless to resist the Imperial Cruiser raking it from the rear, the hulk was slowly breaking up. Salvo after salvo from the *Divine Justice*'s gun decks pounded into the hulk, ripping off huge swathes with every broadside. Ancient reactors in the hulk's depths began to overload, smashing open gaping holes from within. Then the bomber passed into the shadow of the *Divine Justice* and the crippled hulk was lost from view.



CLEANED UP AND in his dress uniform, Jaeger hurried to the briefing chamber. As he entered, Commodore Veniston was debriefing the Devils. Kaurl was there too, standing silently behind the Commodore, his face a blank mask. Jaeger listened to Veniston's praise for Devil Squadron's part in the day's victory, and what he heard set his teeth on edge.

'And I can say without doubt that the whole mission was a complete success,' the

Commodore, 'and I am glad that it was achieved with acceptable losses.'

That was too much to bear. Jaeger stepped into the centre of the briefing chamber, blazing with fury. He'd already gone through too much, without having to stand around while the Commodore praised the Devils' conduct and said that the Raptors' casualties simply didn't matter.

"Acceptable losses"?" Jaeger demanded, eyes ablaze. 'What the hell do you mean, "acceptable losses"? I lost fifteen good men on that mission while these flyboys were sitting on their carefully polished backsides waiting for their orders! Fifteen men lost whilst thirty others watched and waited! If you had sent us out together, we could have handled ourselves better. Damn it, you didn't even tell us what our target was, did you?'

Veniston and Kaurl stared at Jaeger in rank disbelief, which only served to fuel his fury. 'Of course,' he spat, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper, 'we're just the Raptors, we don't really count, do we? Well I'm sorry if we're not related, Commodore, but my life is worth as much to the Emperor as that of your own kin!'

Kaurl was beside himself. 'What is the meaning of this, Flight Commander?' the Captain stormed, face like thunder. 'How dare you speak to a senior officer like this! Call for the Officer of the Watch. Have Commander Jaeger taken to the brig immediately!'

Jaeger clamped his mouth shut with a snort, and bristled in impotent fury. Without a word or look, Veniston walked from the chamber, ignoring the icy glare that Jaeger shot him as the Commodore walked past.



JAEGER FELT HIS arm grabbed just below the elbow and he spun round. Lieutenant Strand was standing there, flanked by two ratings. 'We've orders to take you down, Mister Jaeger,' he said, face impassive. Jaeger nodded numbly and followed them out of the briefing room. After a moment, Captain Kaurl caught up with the group and dismissed the Lieutenant and guards with a waved hand.

'You went too far, Jacques,' Kaurl started, his voice soft, his eyes meeting the Flight Commander's gaze. 'If you don't have respect, then you don't have anything.'

Kaurl led the flyer into one of the secondary hangars. Inside were the coffins of the dead, waiting to be ejected into space during the burial ceremony that evening. On each was an inscribed nameplate, even for those who had left no body behind: Gunner Saile, Raptor Squadron; Gunner Barnus, Raptor Squadron; Gunner Cord, Raptor Squadron; Commander Drake, Raptor Squadron; the row went on and on.

There were twenty-one coffins in all. When Jaeger read the nameplate of the sixteenth, he stumbled back a step in shock. It read Flight Commander Raf, Devil Squadron. He turned to Kaurl, his brow knitted in confusion.

'I- I don't-' Jaeger stammered, lost for words. His anger was gone; he felt empty.

'The Devils' attack wasn't the "easy in, easy out" mission you seemed to think it was,' the Captain tersely. 'They still had to get through several Ork attack ships, the roaming fighter-bombers. Raf was killed guiding his plane into the engines of one of the Ork attack ships that was blocking the *Divine Justice*'s approach. He knowingly sacrificed himself for the completion of the task, and you'll do well to remember him with pride.'

Kaurl stepped between Jaeger and the coffin, forcing the Flight Commander to look at him. 'I devised the plan of attack on the engines, not the Commodore,' the Captain went on relentlessly. 'It was me who decided that two waves were needed: the Raptors in first to silence the engine defence guns picked up by the Mechanicus' scan, then the Devils to finish off the whole mission. If you'd gone in together, would you have had any more chance of success? Would ten Marauders have had a better chance of destroying that battery. No, don't reply. You know what I say is true.'

'There were two separate targets which required two missions. We couldn't risk the Orks fixing the gun turret while the Marauders were back on board re-armng and refuelling. It had to be done this way. Neither of the two squadrons had it particularly good, let me assure you. And

the reason I didn't tell you it was a battery was to make sure you didn't worry. Come, be honest, if you'd known it was a massive gun battery, would you have been so confident?"

Jaeger considered the Captain's argument, and he could see the logic. But that didn't alter the fact that they were sent into a situation without knowing the full risks. 'Taking on a massive gun battery isn't as simple as blowing up defenceless engines, sir,' Jaeger protested.

'I knew it would be hard, and that men would die,' the Captain told Jaeger, his eyes showing that he understood the Flight Captain's concerns. As they spoke, Kaurl led Jaeger out of the hanger and they continued down to the brig.

'Don't you think that every time I order an attack, I don't consider the lives of my men? You had the cover from the Thunderbolts for that second fighter attack. Why do you think it took so long for them to arrive? They were supposed to be escorting Devil Squadron. I didn't sign death warrants for your crews, I gave them a chance to prove themselves, to show what Raptor Squadron could really do. Lord Veniston had the chance to over-rule me, knowing that his nephew was going to be having just as much of a hard time as you were. But he did not.'

'Why the hell not?' Jaeger asked with a flick of his hand. 'What the hell does Raptor Squadron mean to him? Raf was in the Devils, so surely his main loyalty lay there.'

'That's not for me to say. That aside, I know that the Commodore was as keen as myself to give your squadron its chance for glory. Without your efforts, the Devils would have been obliterated by the Ork cannons, and after that the *Divine Justice* would have been facing a fully operational enemy, instead of a sitting target. Everybody realises that – including Lord Veniston.'

As they spoke, Kaurl led Jaeger into the brig, where they found Commodore Veniston waiting silently. Jaeger looked at the Commodore, and for the first time realised the pain and anguish he must be feeling.

'You can leave the prisoner in my care now, Captain,' the Commodore said, finally meeting Jaeger's gaze. Veniston appeared as calm and collected as ever at first glance,

with only coldness in his eyes betraying any emotion the Commodore might be feeling at his nephew's death.

As Kaurl bowed and left, Veniston stepped up to Jaeger and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. 'While you are in the cell, think on what has happened today.' The Commodore's voice was quiet but strong. He spoke with years of authority. It struck Jaeger that this was the very first time the officer had addressed him directly since his arrival on the *Divine Justice*.

'Your enthusiasm, your dedication, are laudable,' his superior was saying. 'But you must expand your perspective, trust in your superiors. Remember always: the cause justifies the sacrifice. No mission I've ever flown or commanded in the Emperor's name was ever a waste, and while I retain my mental faculties things will stay that way.'

Jaeger didn't know what to say. His mind was befuddled with post-battle exhaustion and his thoughts were reeling, trying to make some sense of the unexpected sequence of events that had followed his outburst in the briefing chamber. 'I'll think on that, sir,' he managed to mumble.

'Just see that you do, lad,' the Commodore said. With a cursory flick of his head, Veniston directed the two attendant sentries to lead Jaeger into the small, sparse cell.

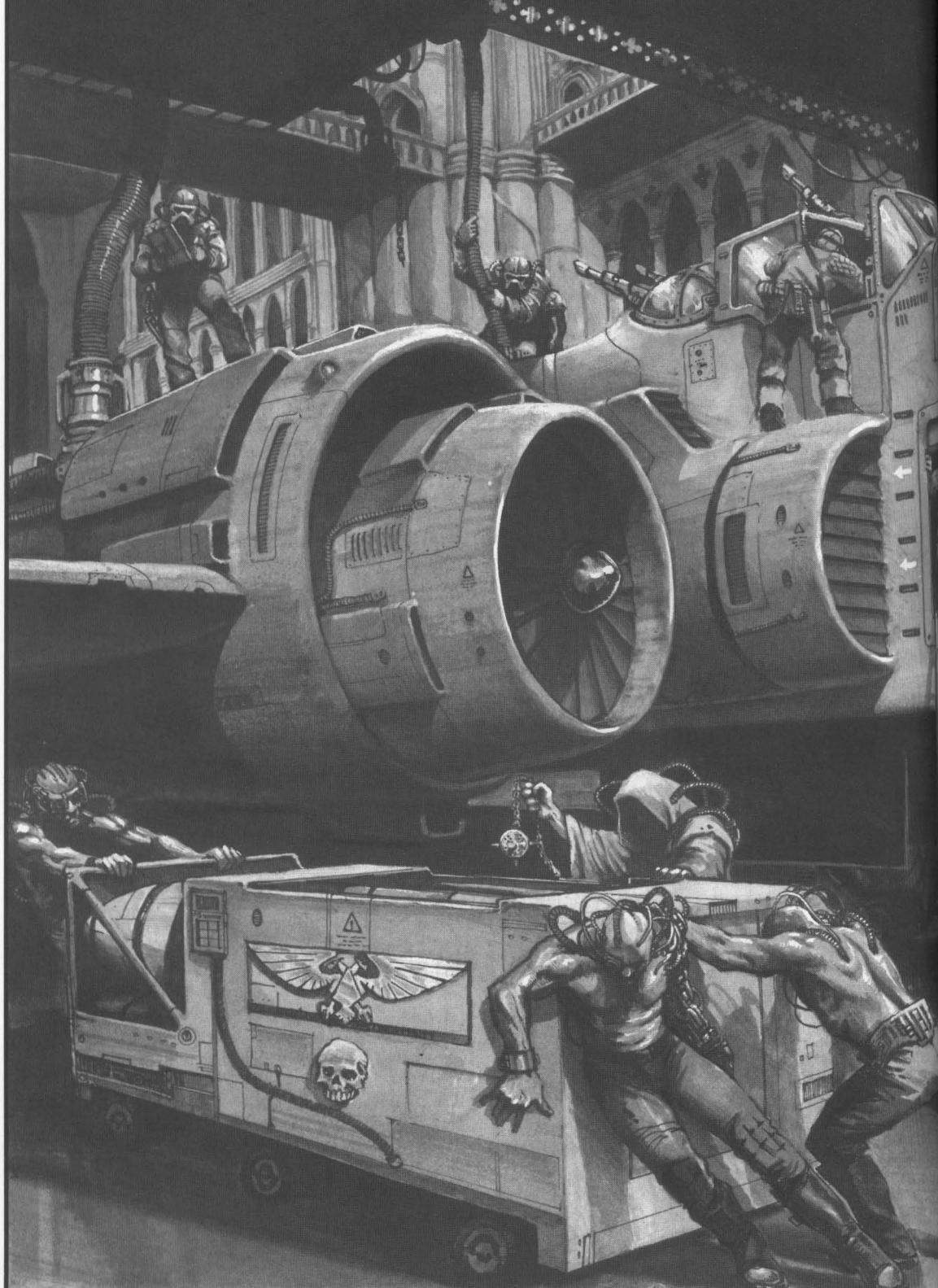
As the thick steel door closed behind him with a echoing clang, Jaeger's thoughts were troubled. He sat down on the small bunk and hung his head in his hands. What did Veniston mean, 'No mission I've ever flown'?

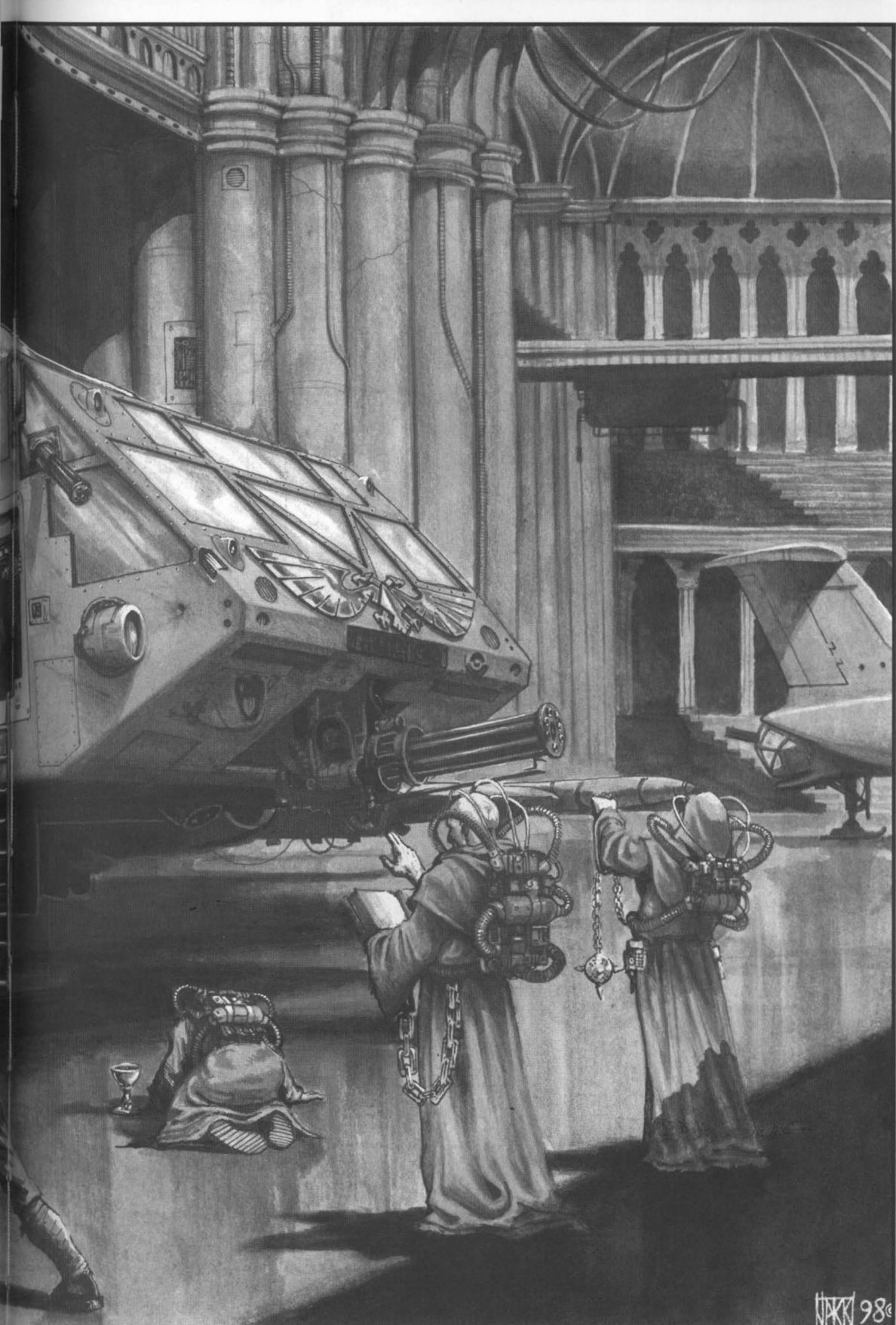
In his head, he could not shake a small detail, barely glimpsed as the Commodore had taken his hand from Jaeger's shoulder. Jaeger looked down at his black gauntlets, part of the Flight Commander's dress uniform required by regulations. Veniston had been wearing black gloves too, each with a small, familiar insignia. Picked out in delicate gold thread on Veniston's gloves had been an Eagle Rampant, the unmistakable sign of Raptor Squadron. ●





RAPTOR SQUADRON







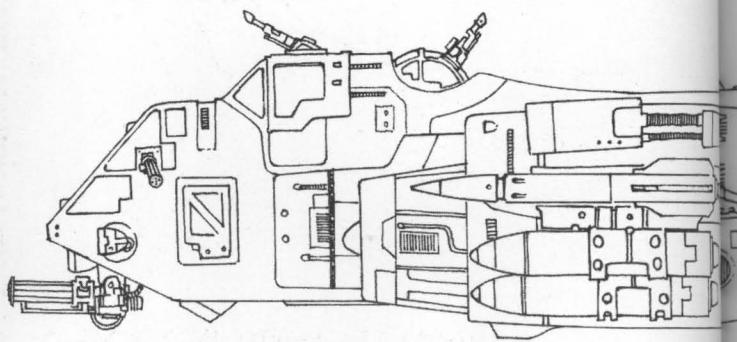
RAPTOR SQUADRON

Assigned to Imperial Cruiser, Divine Justice, operating out of Bakka Imperial Navy Base, as part of Battlefleet Tempestus.

Marauders: 5 (plus 1 back-up)

Crew: 30 (plus 10 standby reserves)

Groundcrew: 50, including Tech-Priests and servitors



Captain Jacques Jaeger, Flight Commander

Years of service: 8

Missions flown: 12 • Hours flown: 72

Darmas Berhandt, Bombardier

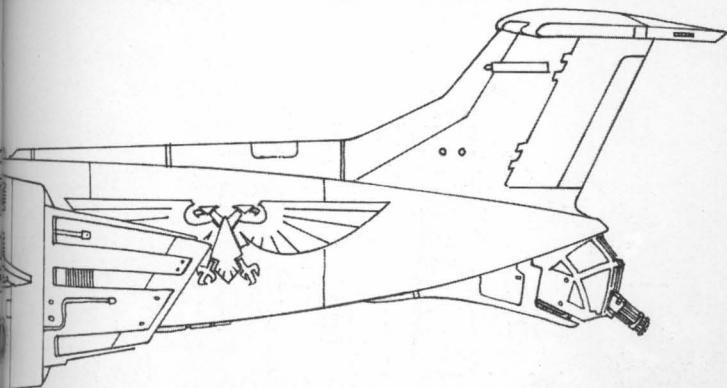
Years of service: 9

Missions flown: 18 • Hours flown: 74

Tech-Adept Galt Ferix, Adeptus Mechanicus

Years of service: 3

Missions flown: 9 • Hours flown: 40



IMPERIAL NAVY MARAUDER BOMBER

Dimensions: 260 ft long; wingspan 360 ft
Weight: 190 tons unladen
Maximum atmospheric thrust: 286.75²
Planetary range: 4000 ikm (with auxilliary fuel supply 6500 ikm)
Maximum interstellar thrust: 501.7³
Interstellar flight time: 9.3 hours (with auxilliary air tanks 14 hours)
Armament: Nose-mounted Vulcan pattern las-cannons
2 dorsal-mounted twin autocannons
Tail-mounted heavy bolters
Payload: 6 wing-slung Flail missiles
14,500 lbs of explosives or incendiaries



**Maxen Marte, Gunner
First Class**

Years of service: 16

Missions flown: 36 • Hours flown: 108



**Veron Saile, Gunner
Second Class**

Years of service: 2

Missions flown: 6 • Hours flown: 19



**Chalin Arick, Gunner
Second Class**

Years of service: 2

Missions flown: 7 • Hours flown: 21

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

by Dan Abnett

JT WAS THE milk-maid who saw them first. On a late spring evening, one month past Mitterfruhl, the sky was a dark marble blue and the stars were out: thousands of them, polished and glinting in the heavens.

The Ganmark family had ruled the border town of Linz, a cattle market hub at the edge of the Drakwald, for sixteen generations. Two hundred years before, the serving Margrave had established the manor at the edge of the long lake, three miles from the town itself. The manor house itself was a fine dwelling, with farmlands adjoining, a park, and splendid prospects across to the dark stands of the Drakwald to the east.

Lenya, the milk-maid, liked working there. She had a straw bed in the servant's wing and the food was always plentiful. She was only seventeen, but they were good to her – cook, the chamberlain, all the senior staff; even the Margrave had smiled at her once. Her duties were simple: in the morning, collect the eggs; an hour after dusk, perform the evening milking. In the meantime, polish, clean, scrub, peel or chop anything you were told to.

She liked the evening milking, especially at this time of year. The sky was so clear, and the stars were, well, perfect. Her mother had always told her to count the stars when you had the chance. To make

sure they were all there. If an old star went out, bad luck was sure to follow.

As she crossed the stable yard to the dairy, she noticed there were in fact more stars out that night than usual. Like the speckles on an egg, or the twinkling bubbles on the lip of the milk pail. So many. And that beautiful blue one down by the horizon...

New stars. A good sign, surely?

Then she saw the other new stars, stars in the tree-line above the manor house. Burning, hot stars, like eyes, like –

Lenya dropped the pail.

She realised they were torches, flaming torches held aloft in the black, armoured fists of twenty or so sinister horseback warriors. Even as she realised this, the raiders broke into a charge, thundering down on the manor house. They seemed to move like part of the darkness, as if the night was blurring, as if they were made of smoke. There was a strong scent in the night air, sweet, but dusty-dry.

She screamed, a little, in surprise and confusion.

Then she saw the other, smaller stars – the fires that burning behind the matt-black visors and in the sockets of the flaring, infernal horses.

She screamed again. Certainly the loudest and perhaps the last scream of her life.

JN THE NAME of Ulric, now we'll see some fine sport!' Morgenstern announced, and laughed out loud. Around him, in the stable block of the Temple compound, his fellow knights of the White Company joined his laugh and playful comments flew back and forth. Thirteen powerful steeds were saddled and ready for action. There was power in the straw-floored stone chamber, the bridled power of great horses and potent fighting men.

'Ten shillings, I'll wager you,' Anspach declared with a chuckle, 'I'll have badged my armour with the blood of the enemy by the first night! Yes, I will!' he roared at the hearty gainsayers all around.

'I'll take that,' Gruber said, quietly. There was a stunned silence. Gruber was the oldest and most worthy of the company, and everyone knew how he disapproved of young, rakish Anspach's wagering habits. But there had been a new spring in his step, a new fire in his eyes, since their great victory in the Drakwald before Mitterfruhl. Jurgen, their dear, lost leader, had been avenged and honour had been returned to them. Of them all, Gruber most personified the revival of their spirits.

'Well?' Gruber asked the dumbstruck Anspach, a wry grin on his old, lined face.

Anspach roared and stuck out a mailed fist. 'Done!' he cried.

'And done!' Gruber agreed with a more mirthsome laugh.

'Now that's the spirit of the company I like to see!' howled the huge warrior, Morgenstern, clapping his hands together.

Off to his right, the Company's young standard bearer Aric smiled and made a final check of his mount's saddle. Straightening up amid the hubbub, he caught the eye of his youthful comrade, Drakken. The latter was barely twenty, just a wolf cub, transferred into their company to replace one of the brave souls they had lost in the Drakwald raid. He was a short, yet powerful, stocky young man, and Aric had seen his skill with the horse and hammer in practice, but he was completely inexperienced, and was certainly overawed by the boisterous, oathing company. Aric crossed to him.

'All ready?' he asked, good-naturedly. Drakken quickly set to his saddle again, trying to look efficient.

'Relax,' Aric said soothingly. 'It was only yesterday I was like you... a virgin to war, and to a company of wolves like these. Go with it, and you'll find your place.'

Drakken gave him a nervous grin. 'Thanks. I just feel like an outsider in this... this family.'

Aric smirked and nodded. 'Yes, this is a family. A family who lives and dies together. Trust us, and we'll trust you back.'

He cast a glance round the room, and picked out a few of the rowdy company for Drakken's benefit. Each of the warriors wore the red plate armour and grey wolf pelt of the Temple. 'See Morgenstern there? He's a prize winning ox, and he'll drink you under any table anywhere. But he's got a good heart and a heavy hammer. Gruber: stick close by him; no one has the experience or sheer courage of that man. Anspach, well... never trust his judgement or take his wagers, but trust his right arm. A fury on the field. Kaspen there, he's our surgeon too. He'll see to any wounds you collect. Einholt and Schell, why, they're the best trackers we have... Schiffer, Bruckner, Dorff: excellent horsemen all...'

He paused.

'And remember you're not alone in being new. Lowenhertz also transferred in, same time as you.'

Their eyes wandered across to the last knight, who was alone in the stable corner, checking his horse's shoeing.

Lowenhertz was a tall, regal-looking man, handsome and aquiline. It was said he had noble blood, though Morgenstern swore this was a bastard heritage. He was quiet and aloof. Ten years he'd served in the White Wolves, in four separate companies. It seemed he had never found a place to suit him, or one that wanted him perhaps. No one knew why he had come to them, though Anspach wagered it was because he was biding his time until the command of a company came up. Gruber thought so too, and that was enough for all of them.

'Lowenhertz?' Drakken murmured. 'He's not new blood like me. He's had time in the companies... and he... he has an air to him. He frightens me.'

Aric thought about this and nodded. 'Me too.'

Their conversation was shut off by the slamming open of the stable door. Ganz, the young company commander, truly

resplendent in full red plate and wolfskin, strode in.

'This is it...' Kaspen murmured.

'Moment of truth,' Schell agreed.

'Well, sir?' Anspach asked.

Ganz faced them. 'We ride for Linz at once—'

He had to wave down their cheering. 'Enough! Enough! Lads, it's not the glory we were hungry for. I've just had our orders conveyed by the Grandmaster himself.'

'And? What does the old fart have to say?' Morgenstern asked raucously.

'Respect, please, Morgenstern!' Gruber yelled.

'My apologies, old friend! I should have said what does *his* *highness* the old fart have to say?'

Ganz looked sad and tired. He sighed. 'Three companies of Knights Panther have been sent out to Linz to hunt down these raiders and make sure no harm befalls the town itself. We must go to provide... escort.'

'Escort?' Gruber said coldly. The silence was total.

The Margrave, his family and many of his household staff escaped the raid that burned his manor. As you know, Linz owes fealty to our beloved Elector here in Middenheim, and the Elector is most concerned for his cousin the Margrave's safety.

A long story cut short, we are to escort the Margrave's entourage back here to the city to keep him and his safe.'

There was an audible, collective groan.

'So the Panthers get the glory?' Anspach said for all of them. 'They get to hunt down and battle these raiding jackals while we get nursemaid duty.'

Ganz could do nothing but shrug. 'Technically, it's an honour...' he began.

Morgenstern said something both uncomplimentary and physically challenging about 'honour'.

'All right, old friend,' Ganz said, tight mouthed, unamused. 'Let's just do the job we've been asked to. Mount up. Company rides with me.'



TIT WAS TWO DAYS' hard ride to Linz. Late spring rain, brisk and horizontal, washed across the meadows and trackways as they rode. Then the pale sun came out again.

They could see the ruins of the Ganmark manor from several miles away, and smell it even before that. Dark, oily smoke hung in the air like a sinuous rain cloud against the spring afternoon and there was a curious smell, like sweetmeats and spices mixed with the ash from a funeral urn.

Riding beside Ganz, Gruber wrinkled his nose. The young commander looked over at him.

'Gruber? What is it?'

Gruber cleared his throat and spat sideways as if to rid his mouth of the smell on the breeze. 'No idea. Like nothing I've ever smelled.'

'Not in this part of the land,' a voice said from beside them. Ganz and Gruber looked over to see the chiselled profile of Lowenhertz. The tall knight rode in beside them, skilled and coolly measured.

'What do you mean, friend?' Gruber asked.

Lowenhertz smiled a not entirely friendly smile. 'My great grandfather was a Knight Panther. Went on two crusades into those hellish distant lands of heat and dust. When I was a child, he used to tell stories of the ancient tombs and mausoleums, the dry, deathless things that haunted the nights.'

'He told me stories. I remember them so clearly, stood in his old solar, where he kept his books and mementoes, the old armour, the banners and pennants. There was always a smell in that old room: mortuary dust, dry bones, and the sweet pungent stench of the grave spices. He always told me it was the smell of death from the far-off tombs of Arabay.'

He shrugged. 'I can smell it once more. And so much stronger than I did in my great grandfather's solar as a child.'

Ganz was silent as their horses jogged on through the open meadow. Small, green butterflies, early risers in the fresh spring, whirled in formation across their path. Ganz looked ahead, down the sweep of the valley, to the blackened timber skeleton that was all that remained of Ganmark Manor. Smoke still curled up, like dark fingers clawing the air.

'I'd take it as a personal favour, Lowenhertz, if you didn't share such observations with the rest of the men.'

Lowenhertz nodded curtly. 'Of course, Commander.' With that he spurred his mount forward and rode ahead of them down the winding track.



GT THE GATES of Linz, the Panther Knights rode out to meet them, haughty and stone-faced. Their captain, upright and smart, saluted Ganz stiffly; the White Wolf returned the greeting.

'Ulric bring you safe! Captain von Volk, Knights Panther, Heimsdahl Garrison.'

'Ulric look to you! Ganz, Commander, White Company.'

'Welcome to Linz; I stand relieved.'

The Panther captain fell in beside Ganz and his men rode around in a precision display until they were perfectly flanking the Wolf formation as an escort. The Panthers were in line, and even the hoofbeats of their steeds were in perfect time, compared to the powerful, tired syncopation of the straggled, dusty Wolves. Ganz felt someone was showing off.

'Glad you're finally here, Commander Ganz,' von Volk said good-naturedly. 'We've been chafing to get off after these creatures but of course we couldn't leave the Margrave and his entourage undefended.'

'But you've sent scouting parties out?'

'Of course. Four field groups. They've had no success, but I feel confident that once I field my entire force I'll have these murdering scum good and proper.'

From behind them, Gruber snorted with quiet derision.

Von Volk turned in his saddle. 'What's that, soldier? Oh, I'm sorry, old man... were you just talking in your sleep?'

Gruber did not rise to it. 'Nothing, sir. Just clearing my throat.'

Von Volk turned away without a care. 'Commander Ganz, the Margrave awaits you in the Guild Hall. I'd like you to have him and his party away by dusk.'

'And travel at night?' Ganz was all reason and charm. 'We'll leave at dawn, Captain. Even a raw recruit knows that is the best time to embark on an escort drill.' Von Volk scowled. 'Mobilise your men,' Ganz added. 'We'll take it from here. Good hunting.'

MY DEAR, DEAR fellow!' the Margrave of Linz said, pumping Ganz's hand. 'My dear, dear fellow! How we've waited for you!'

'Sir,' Ganz managed. The vast panelled chamber of the Guild Hall was full of baggage crates and rolled carpets. Around it idled the twenty or so servants and staff who had escaped the raid on the manor.

And presumably carried this stuff to safety, mused Ganz. How in the name of Ulric do you roll a carpet during an attack?

The Margrave, a portly, pale aristocratic type in his late thirties, had put on his best robes to greet the Wolves, but sticking-out tufts of hair and an overwhelming scent of clove oil told that he hadn't seen decent sanitation since the attack.

'I asked for Wolves most particularly,' the Margrave said. 'In my letter to the Elector I requested Wolves above all, a company of Wolves. Oh, let the Panthers do the hunting work, but give me Wolves to see me and my family home.'

'The Panthers are fine warriors. They'll find your attackers,' Ganz said smoothly, not believing it for a moment. 'We'll get you home. Now, how many are you?'

The Margrave ushered him a round. 'We fill three coaches and four baggage carts. Sixteen servants, the luggage, plus myself and my children, and their nurse...'

He pointed to a pair of ghastly, knickerbockered five year olds who were thumping each other on a pile of rugs. An elderly and emaciated black-robed nurse watched over them.

'Hanz and Hartz!' he sighed, clasping his palms together. 'Aren't they adorable?'

'Unbearably,' Ganz said.

'And then of course, there's my wife...' the Margrave added. Ganz looked round as indicated. Her ladyship was pouring drinks for the thirsty Wolves herself, from pitchers her servants carried.

She was tall, shapely and hypnotically beautiful. Her dark, ringletted, luxuriant hair ran all the way down to the extraordinary curve of her hips in her sheer silk gown. Her skin was pale, her eyes dark and deep like pools. Her lips were full and red and—

Ganz turned back to look at the ugly children very quickly.

'They're not hers, of course,' the Margrave was continuing. 'Their dear, dear

mother died in childbirth. Gudrun and I married last year.'

Gudrun, thought Ganz. By Ulric! Heaven has a name!



WINE FOR YOU, brave knight,' she said softly. Gruber took the beaker and gazed at the vision before him.

'Thank you, lady,' he said. She was amazing. Quite the most beautiful woman he had ever seen; dark, exotic, mysterious... yet here she was serving all these dirty, stinking warriors wine. Serving them by hand herself.

'You are our salvation, sir,' she said to him, perhaps noticing his puzzled look. 'After our nights of terror and pain, this is the least I can do.'

'She's amazing...' Anspach breathed, clutching his untouched goblet as she moved on.

'If I was thirty years younger and a hundredweight lighter...' Morgenstern began.

'You'd still be a fat old wastrel with no chance!' Einholt finished.

'Lord Ulric above us,' Drakken murmured to Aric. 'She's quite lovely...'

Aric couldn't take his eyes off the Margrave's wife, and he nodded before realising Drakken wasn't looking at her at all.

'Drakken?'

'Her, Aric.' Drakken smiled and pointed to the young girl huddled amid the servants. She was barely eighteen by Aric's guess, dirty and soiled from the adventures that had overtaken her, and dressed in a milk-maid's smock. She was... pretty, he had to admit.

'Drakken!' Aric hissed. 'First rule of Wolfhood: if a goddess gives you wine, you don't drool after her cherubs.'

'What goddess?' Drakken asked, staring at the milk-maid.

Aric smiled and shook his head.



THEY LEFT LINZ at dawn. The carts and coaches rolled out in line, flanked by the thirteen Wolf Knights into the dawn mist. At the head of the column, Ganz called Gruber, Anspach and Lowenhertz to him.

'Ride ahead. Scout the woods,' he told them. They spurred away.

Aric, the standard of the company held aloft, moved up beside Ganz. 'Drakken needs some purpose to settle his nerve, sir,' he said.

Ganz thought for a moment. 'You're right,' he said at last and called back for the youngest knight. Drakken rode forward eagerly.

'Join the scouts,' Ganz said. 'They could use an extra hand.'

Smiling, Drakken charged forward at a gallop off into the smoky woodland.



ANSPACH REINED up sharply. For a moment, he had almost lost his bearings in the mist. The sun was up, but there was barely any light in the swirling vapour and the dark trees.

'What was that?' he said to Gruber nearby.

'Probably Lowenhertz,' Gruber said. 'He went off to the left.'

'No!' Anspach said sharply, turning his horse hard. 'With me, Gruber! Now!'

The two warriors plunged through the woodland, kicking up dirt and wafting the mist. They caught a sweet and dry smell of ash. Anspach freed his hammer from its clasp.

They found Drakken in a clearing. His horse was dead, and so was one of the black knights who had ambushed him. Drakken's red plate armour was ripped open, and his shoulder was gashed, but still he screamed fiercely, swirling his warhammer to crack another head as he had the skull of the man who brought him down.

He was surrounded by four more dark warriors, each clad in strangely angular black plate armour with spike-pointed, almost bulbous helmets, a fine mesh of chainmail rattling around their waists, and swinging dark blue, serrated swords that hooked into fang-like curves,. Their horses were huge and black, and, like the knights

themselves, their eyes glowed with an internal fire. There was something almost insubstantial about the edges of them, about the hem of their swirling cloaks, as if they were solidifying out of the mist and darkness itself. The smell of sweet spice and ash was intense.

Drakken ducked an attack that severed a tree behind him. Anspach and Gruber leapt their horses forward to avoid the crashing timbers and branches.

Gruber swung his hammer round and came about. The nearest of these almost ghostly raiders swung forward with his sword, filling Gruber's nose with the dry, dead stink.

Anspach and his horse exploded into the gap between them and crushed the enemy's head with a downwards blow of his hammer. The matt-black spiked helmet shattered and dark fumes billowed out as the glowing eyes went dark.

Gruber found another two on him hard, slashing with their venomous hooked swords. 'Ulric curse you!' he spat.

Lowenhertz blasted out of the mist and undergrowth, his horse at full leap. His whirling hammer smashed the first warrior out of his saddle, and then with a skilled and powerful reverse turn, Lowenhertz broke the chest of Gruber's second attacker.

The remaining dark warrior spurred forward with a raucous, unintelligible curse, red eyes blazing from behind his visor, his vile horse wretched and stinking.

Anspach swung his hammer round sideways over his shoulder and smashed the last warrior to the ground. For a moment, the impact resounded around the deadened clearing.

Anspach leapt down and helped the shaken Drakken up.

'Well done, youth! You're a Wolf now, no mistake.'

Gruber turned to Lowenhertz.

'Thanks go to you. You saved my life,' he said.

'Think nothing of it,' Lowenhertz said. He gazed down at the bodies of the foes. Inside the rent-open armour of the nearest, nothing but powdery bones could be seen, flaking away like ash in the breeze.

There was a long, chill silence.

'In the name of Ulric!' Gruber hissed, fear clawing deep. 'Let's get back to the convoy!'

THE DEAD don't lie still,' Gruber murmured to Ganz as they rejoined the halted train. Anspach was helping the injured Drakken to a cart, and Kaspen had dismounted to tend the young man's injury. Lowenhertz rode in silently, some way behind Gruber. An electric hush had fallen when the four warriors had returned, the bloody Drakken sharing Anspach's horse, all of them flecked with dark smudges of blood. Ganz was horribly aware of the way the Margrave's people stared at his men in horror and silent alarm.

'Don't riddle, report!' he hissed.

Gruber shook his head, fear still shaking him, easing off his mailed gauntlets. 'We met a bevy of dark... things – Ulric save our souls! They were not... mortal! No doubt the very same abominations who took down the Ganmark Manor. Caught Drakken but by Ulric's teeth he gave them what for. We did the rest, Lowenhertz the lion's share. But they're out there. Ulric help us, Commander! These things are spectres!'

'You mean "ghosts"?' Ganz asked, in a tight whisper.

'I do not know what I mean! I have never met their like before!'

Ganz cursed. 'Hundreds of miles of forest and farmland, Knight's Panther hunting for them, and they stumble on us! What are the chances?'

'What are the chances?' Lowenhertz cut in, quietly but significantly. He seemed to appreciate the Commander's urge to keep the talk out of civilian earshot. 'They raid the manor, then they find us...'

'What do you mean?' Aric asked, easing his grip on the lofty standard.

'I mean... maybe they're after something. Something that was in the manor, something that's here with us now?'

There was a long silence. Horses whinnied and shook off flies.

Ganz wiped his fist across his mouth. 'You are remarkably well informed, Lowenhertz,' he said finally.

'What do you mean?' the knight answered, his eyes hooded.

'You seem to know much of the ways of darkness,' Ganz said frankly.

Lowenhertz laughed out loud. There was little humour in it, but it shook the clearing and made everyone look.

'It is merely logic, Commander... These creatures have wit. They are not brute

beastfolk, not savage greenskins from the rock slopes. They move with a purpose, they have a meaning and a task to all they do. This is not a random chance.'

'Then we'll be careful,' Ganz said simply.

'We should try to discern the nature of their purpose, sir... perhaps by—'

Ganz cut Lowenhertz short. 'We will be careful,' he repeated more firmly. 'Aric — check that Drakken is comfortable and ready to move. We will ride on.'

He looked down as the Margrave hurried up on foot from his carriage. He was attended by two servants who scrambled after him. His face was not happy.

'Are we in danger, sir knight?' he asked breathlessly.

'You are in the company of wolves, noble sir,' Ganz said gracefully. 'You requested us, I seem to recall, and knew we would see you safely—'

'Aye, indeed! I don't mean to doubt... but still... are they still out there?'

'On my honour, Margrave, on the honour of my men and in the name of Ulric who guides us, we will be safe.'

By his side, Gruber sat back in the saddle. He was still shaking from the combat, his pulse thundering. Too much, too hard for an old man, he thought. His eyes scanned the carriage train as they made ready to move out.

In the door window of the Margrave's wagon, he caught sight of the nobleman's wife. She gazed out from the shadows, a wicked smile on her lips. Gruber looked away. He wished to dear heaven he had not seen her look.

Aric rode back to the cart where Drakken was being minded. It carried several of the kitchen staff and the elderly nurse of the noble children.

Drakken did not seem to notice. The milk-maid Lenya was devotedly helping Kaspen dress his wounds.

'Keep them clean and dry, and watch for infection,' Kaspen told her and she nodded obediently.

She gazed into Drakken's eyes as Kaspen got down off the wagon.

'I will tend you, sir. You are very brave,' she said.

'I did nothing but my duty,' Drakken said, a foolish smile on his face.

Aric watched them, chuckled and rode back to Ganz.

'Drakken's as happy as a cub,' he told the commander.

'Then we ride. Move on!' Ganz cried. 'Move on!'



NT NIGHTFALL, they camped on a rocky slope overlooking a bend in a nameless stream. The Wolves built watch fires all around the perimeter and stood guard in shifts all night.

At midnight, Ganz did his round of the duty. He passed a few moments with Einholz and Bruckner at their posts as the rest of the party settled down for sleep. Crossing to check on Aric, Ganz saw a dark shape out beyond the edge of the firelight. He stiffened and crept out into the darkness, his hand sliding his hunting knife from its sheath.

'Lowenhertz!' he hissed.

The knight turned in surprise, lowering a beautiful brass astrolabe through which he had been sighting the heavens.

'Commander?'

'What in the name of the Wolf are you doing out here?'

'It is difficult to take accurate readings close to the firelight,' Lowenhertz began.

'Readings?'

'Of the stars, Commander. To see if any strange patterns or manifestations could be discerned. My great grandfather taught me that celestial signs and augurs accompanied the machinations of the deathless ones...'

Ganz cut him off, angry and snarling. 'I know see why you have never made command yourself! They don't trust you, do they? Our Temple elders don't trust you with the lives of men because you are too far gone, too close to the darkness itself!'

Lowenhertz paused and frowned. 'Oh!' he said at last. 'I see... Commander, you think it's me, don't you? You think I'm part of this danger?'

'I—' Ganz blurted, wrong-footed.

Lowenhertz laughed deeply. 'Forgive me, sir. I am just what I seem to be: a loyal servant of Ulric whose mind sometimes asks too many questions. My father was a Knight Panther... he died at Antler Hill, torn open by the hounds of Chaos. I have always sought to be one step ahead, to know more

of my foe than they know of me, to serve the Temple as best as my body – and mind – are able. I would not have you distrust me! But if I can serve you and you can trust me...'

There was a long silence, then Ganz extended his hand for the astrolabe. 'So have you found anything?' he said quietly.



DRAKKEN WAS curled up in the rolls of carpet behind the wagon, relaxing in the firelight. As a shadow fell over him he blinked up out of his half-slumber. Lenya was there, her smile luminous in the shadows.

'Are you thirsty, knight?' she asked.

'My name is Krieg, Krieg Drakken,' he said. 'I wish you would call me that.'

'I will, Krieg. On two conditions. One, if you tell me you're thirsty and two, if you call me Lenya.'

'I am thirsty, Lenya,' he said softly.

She giggled and turned away to fetch a drink.

Drakken settled back and closed his eyes. His shoulder ached, but all in all this was turning out to be a fine debut as a White Wolf.

A shadow fell across him again.

'I hope the water's cool...' he began, then tailed off when he realised it wasn't the returning Lenya. The old nurse crouched down by him.

'Calm now my little pet,' she said, warmly. 'Oh, but I know I'm not so handsome as you milk-maid, but I care as much for the well-being of my guardians. And you have had a long day.'

Drakken relaxed and smiled. Her tone was so reassuring and calm. No wonder she made her life as the custodian of children.

'I only stopped by to bless you, my lamb,' she said and reached into the neck of her smock. 'I have a lucky charm, given me by my mother years ago. I would have you take it in your hand to speed you to health.'

The nurse held out a glittering amulet attached to a long cord around her neck. Its mount was pewter, but the thing itself was a curve of dark glass, shaped like a claw, a fragment perhaps of something else, something very old.

'Always brought me luck and health,' she said.

He smiled and took it in his hand. It felt warm.

'Now blessing be on you, my poor wounded knight.'

'Thank you, lady,' Drakken said. He felt warmer, safer, more whole.

'Now Lenya returns with a cup of water,' said the nurse taking back the charm and getting up. 'You'll have no more time with a old fool like me. Be safe, knight.'

Then Lenya was at Drakken's side again, offering the cup to his lips.

'Old Maris fussing over you again?' she said with a grin. 'She's so kind. The children dote on her. The Margrave was lucky to find her last year when he needed a wet-nurse.'

'She's a fine old lady, and very caring,' Drakken said between sips. 'But I know who I would rather have care for me...'



DO YOU MAKE a habit of spying on women?' the Margrave's wife asked with a delicious curl to her lips.

Gruber stopped in his tracks and fumbled for the right words. 'I was... patrolling the camp, my lady.'

'And that brought you back behind my carriage as I was dressing for bed?' she retorted.

Gruber turned away, too conscious of the fact he was in the company of a woman who wore little more than a satin shroud. 'I apologise, lady. I-'

'Oh hush, knight!' she said with a chiming laugh. 'I'm flattered a man as worthy and distinguished as you would blush in my company. I appreciate your efforts. We are all in your care.'

Gruber shifted awkwardly and then turned to go.

'What is your name, knight?'

'Wilhelm Gruber,' he said, turning back. He felt suddenly bold. 'Who are you, lady?'

'The wife of the Margrave of Linz, unless that had passed you by,' she replied, laughing again.

'Is that all?' he asked sharply.

She said nothing in return. There was a long silence.

'You'd best return to your patrol, Gruber,' she said at last. 'I don't know what you think I am, but I'm not happy at the implications.'

'Neither am I, lady,' Gruber said softly as he strode away. 'We'll see...'



GANZ WATCHED the stars through the polished lenses of Lowenhertz's astrolabe. He was about to ask the name of another constellation when Lowenhertz gripped his arm hard.

'What?'

'Quiet!' Lowenhertz hissed. 'Smell that?'

Ganz inhaled. The sweet, ashy flavour of death was unmistakable. They ducked low, and saw the glowing eye slits of warriors moving down in the vale by the stream.

'I have nothing but my knife!' Ganz whispered.

Lowenhertz tossed him his warhammer and pulled a long, curved war-axe from his saddlebag.

'Give the word, Commander. They've come back for us.'



JT WAS A DARK blur of night and firelight. Ganz thought he counted fifteen of the foe as they charged the camp from the east on foot. They were silent, the shades of the dead. Ganz was not silent. He bellowed his warning as loud as his lungs could bear, and he and Lowenhertz leapt across the stream-side rocks to meet the silent charge. The camp came to life. Hallowing answers came from the sentries, and roars from the sleeping men as they roused. Screams and cries rose from the terrified civilians.

Einholt met the first of the attackers, blocking and whirling his warhammer as he bayed out a call to his wolf brothers. In five seconds, Brucker and Aric, the other two sentries on duty, were by his side, blocking the passage between the crackling watch fires against the red-eyed ghouls that swept out of the night.

Ganz and Lowenhertz were with them a

few seconds later. There were at least twenty of the attackers now, Ganz was certain, but it was so hard to disentangle their dark shapes from the night, or their flashing eyes from the blazing fires. It was as if they were made out of the night itself.

A gleaming jet-black blade whistled past his head and Ganz swung back to guard himself. In doing so, his feet slipped on the earth and he half stumbled. The dark one rose up over him, blade poised.

Morgenstern, only half-armoured and bedraggled from slumber, burst through the darkness and laid the creature low with an immense two-handed hammer blow.

Ganz leapt up and called his thanks to the man-mountain, who was already driving on into the press. He saw Aric fall, gashed in the shoulder. Einholt and Lowenhertz leapt to block him, standing their ground as he pulled himself up again. Lowenhertz's axe whistled in the cold air. With wolf-fire in his blood, Ganz spun his borrowed hammer, used the haft to block a hard sword swing, and then slew his attacker with a sideways smash of the hammerhead.

'For the Temple! For Ulric! White Company!' he bellowed.



JN THE CAMP, there was utter pandemonium. Hammer held tight, Gruber tried to marshal the chaos. 'Kaspen! Anspach! Get the Margrave and his people into cover by the wagons! The rest of you forward to fight!'

Screaming servants and crying children ran in every direction. Cooking pots and fire hearths were upset and kicked over.

'Damn it!' Gruber spat.

He saw Drakken limping into the centre of the camp as fast as he could manage.

'My weapon! Any weapon!' the young man cried hoarsely.

'You're more use to me here!' Gruber yelled. 'Get the children in a wagon. Get their heads down!'

There was another scream, more piercing than before. Gruber wheeled and saw two dark warriors had burst into the encampment from the opposite direction to the main attack, a sneak pincer to get round the cordon. They charged for the wagons.

It was the Margrave's wife who had screamed. She was in the open, trying to catch hold of her two terrified children. The nurse was by her side, trying to scoop the boys into her arms. The warriors bore down on them, swords raised.

Gruber raced forward, lashing out a one-handed hammer swing that shattered armour and knocked one of them to the earth. The other he met and blocked, glance his hammer haft against the slashing blade once, twice, three times to ward off the deadly swings. By then, the first dark warrior was back on his feet.

Gruber dented the helm of the second one and sent him sprawling in time to meet the renewed attack of the first. He stared into the red-lit slits and met the furious assault, swinging a blow that smashed its shield. Then he stabbed hard with the butt of the haft, connecting with jaw. The foe went down and this time a well-placed blow ensured it would not rise again.

The second one was back on its feet now, intent upon the Margrave's wife once more.

With a roar, Gruber hurled his hammer. The great, spinning weapon swooshed across the clearing in flickering circles and broke the creature's back.

Gruber crossed to the Margrave's wife and helped her up. The nurse gathered up the children.

'Get to the wagons!' he hissed.

'Thank you...' she stammered.

'They were hell-bent on getting to you,' Gruber snarled, fixing her eyes with his. 'What is it about you? Are you the jinx who brings this darkness down?'

'No!' she implored, horrified. 'No!'

There was no time for debate. Gruber recovered his hammer and rejoined the fight.



THEY'RE RETREATING!' Anspach announced. The fight had been intense, and too close for comfort. Several of his men were wounded, and there were seven dark warriors twisted, skeletal and dead on the ground. The others, like the wraiths of fairy tales, melted away into the trees.

'Thank the Wolf!' Ganz murmured to

himself, then raised his voice. 'Regroup! Let's get inside the camp and build up the fires. There's a long time till dawn.'

'Commander!' Gruber called urgently.

Ganz joined him. The warrior whose back Gruber had snapped was still alive, twitching and hissing like a reptile on the ground. The civilians stood around in a wide, fascinated, horrified circle.

'Clear these people aside!' Ganz snapped to Dorff and Schiffer. He turned to Gruber. 'I'm beginning to think Lowenhertz is right. We have something or someone these creatures want... that's why they took the Manor and now hound us.'

'I agree. This wasn't a raid, this was a mission to retrieve. They were too direct, putting themselves at risk to get into the camp rather than harry us from a distance.' Gruber took a deep breath. 'I believe it's part of the Margrave's household, and I think I know what...'

'You think it's me,' a voice said from behind them. It was the Margrave's wife, clutching one of her sobbing children. 'I don't know what I've done to earn your mistrust, sir Gruber. I can only imagine that you are threatened by me. All my life, my dark looks and lively manner have made men imagine me some she-devil, some brazen thing to be feared. Can I help my looks, or my appetite for life? Can I help the way I was made? I am no daemon. On my life... on the lives of my children, sirs... I am not the root of this!'

Ganz looked over at his second-in-command. The older, white-haired man dropped his gaze to the earth.

'Seems both of us have jumped to conclusions, old man. Both of us wrong.'

'You too?' Gruber asked.

Ganz nodded briefly. 'Milady, take the children to cover in the wagons. We will finish this. Lowenhertz!'

The noble knight strode over. His chest and shoulder armour had been damaged in the fight, so he had stripped to his jerkin.

'Commander?'

'You have learning, Lowenhertz. How do we get information from our guest here?'

Lowenhertz looked down at the crippled dark one and sank to his haunches. He listened for a moment and shuddered. 'I can make little out from its rasping... the language... perhaps it is the tongue of far Araby. There is one word it repeats.'

Lowenhertz thickly repeated the word back to the creature with distaste. It stirred and hissed and yelped. The White Wolf then muttered the low, guttural word again.

Ganz turned. 'We're getting nowhere...'

Lowenhertz tried the sentence again until the creature replied at last with a guttural response of his own.

'I don't understand him. The words are too strange.' Lowenhertz tried harder, repeating the word again. It was no good.

Then the creature reached out and with a bony hand drew a curved symbol in the dust.

'What is that?' Ganz asked for them all.

'I wish I knew,' Lowenhertz said. 'What is that? A harvest moon? A crescent?'

'A claw,' Drakken said suddenly from behind them. 'And I know where it is.'



THE OLD NURSE, Maris, backed away against the wagon, terror in her eyes and her hands clutched tight to the throat of her dress.

'No!' she said. 'No! You shan't have it!'

Ganz looked round at Drakken and Lowenhertz at his side.

'She's just the wet-nurse,' he said.

'She has the amulet, like a claw. She blessed me with it,' Drakken said.

'If it is what these creatures of darkness seek, lady, you must give it up for all our sakes,' Lowenhertz said firmly.

'This trinket my old dam gave me?' the old woman stammered. 'It's always brought me luck.'

Gruber joined them. 'This makes sense of it. Those warriors I fought... I thought they were after the Lady and her children, but they were after the nurse.'

The Margrave and his wife approached.

'Please, sir!' the old woman cried. 'Make them stop this nonsense.'

'Dear Maris,' the Lady said. 'You have always been kind to my children, so I will defend you from harm, but this is too important. Let us prove this. Give me the charm.'

Wizened hands shaking, the old woman produced the claw talisman and handed it to the Margrave's wife. She took it, turned and marched across to the stricken foe.

Ganz made to stop her, but Gruber held him back.

'She knows what she's doing, that one,' he told his commander.

'Lenya told me the nurse had only been with them for a brief while. Her predecessor had fallen ill and she was brought in from far away,' Drakken said.

Lowenhertz nodded. 'If this malign charm has been in her family for some time they may have known nothing of its power. But it has brought them after her every step of the way. They have caught her scent... or the scent of the thing she owns.'

'But what is it?' Aric asked.

'The talon of some dark Daemon they worship, the shed nail of a god?' Lowenhertz shrugged. 'Who knows? Who wants to know?'

'A man of learning like you?' Ganz asked.

Lowenhertz shook his head. 'There are some things better left un-known, Commander.'

The Margrave's wife held the charm out to the broken creature and then jumped back as it reared up, snarling and mewling, clawing at her. Gruber slew it with a quick, deft blow.

'There's our proof,' he stated.

Everyone froze as a keening sounded through the forest around them. The grave-smell of spice and dry bone wafted around them again.

'They have the scent again, fresher than ever,' Lowenhertz said hurriedly. 'They're coming back.'

'To arms!' Gruber cried, rallying the men.

Ganz held up his hand. 'We'd never take them. They have superior numbers and the night on their side. We barely drove them back before. There is only one way.'

The White Company and their civilian charges drew into a huddle at the centre of the firelight. Beyond the ring of flame, they saw the dark riders approach and heard their hooves. Dozens of red eyes glowed against the blackness, like infernal stars.

Ganz counted the dark shapes out beyond the fire. Once again, as before, there were twenty in that dark company, despite the number the Wolves had killed.

Ganz swore softly. 'They will always return at full strength,' he whispered to Gruber. 'We will never wear them down. We cannot fight because they will overwhelm us. We cannot run because they will find us.'

They are driven beings of the dark who will not stop until they have what they want.'

The foe stood beyond the flames, a ring of evil forms that circled the camp entirely. The sweet ashen smell was wretched.

'Then what do we do? Fight to the last? Die in Ulric's name? ... Give them the charm?' Gruber whispered.

'That – or deny them.' Ganz said. 'Perhaps this is the only chance at survival we have...'

He took the charm and stepped forward so that the dark riders could see him. Then, before they could react, he set it on a rock, and swung Lowenhertz's warhammer up and round in a powerful over-arm motion.

The riders screamed in horror with a single voice. The hammerhead crushed the talisman. There was a burst of light and a flash of green, eldritch flame. The blast knocked Ganz backwards and melted the head of the hammer.

The talisman was gone. Red lightning, like electric blood, speared horizontally around the clearing, and there was a fierce hot wind. The writh-like creatures shrieked as one, twisting, swirling in the air like flapping black rags until they were at last whisked up into the blackness of the night and were gone.



FOUR DAYS' gruelling ride brought them back to Middenheim. The White Company escorted the Margrave's party right to the Elector's palace where they were to be cared for. He dispatched his own men back to the Temple barracks to get rest and have their numerous wounds bound.

There were many partings now. As the Margrave thanked Ganz most effusively time and again, Ganz found his eyes wandering the courtyard. He saw Drakken, sheepish and clumsy, kiss the girl Lenya goodbye. Not for the last time, Ganz was sure. He saw Morgenstern and Anspach horseplaying with the children, and Aric consoling the frightened old woman Maris. And Gruber stood with the Lady Margrave.

'Forgive me, lady,' Gruber said softly. 'I mistrusted you, and that is my shame.'

'You saved my life, sir Gruber. I'd say we're even.'

She smiled and his heart winced again. 'If you were younger and I was free,' she murmured, saying what he was thinking. Their eyes met, fierce for a second, then they both laughed aloud and said farewell.



JN THE GREAT darkness of the Temple, the Wolf Choirs were singing low, heartfelt hymns of thanks and praise. Their voices hung in the still, cool air. Lowenhertz was knelt in prayer before the main altar. He looked up as he heard the footsteps approach behind him. Ganz looked down at him. In his hands, he held an object wrapped in an old wolf pelt.

'The Panthers will be most aggrieved that we stole their thunder,' Lowenhertz said as he rose.

Ganz nodded. 'They'll live. And to think, we thought we were going to miss the action.'

There was a long pause. Ganz fixed him with a gaze. 'I suppose you'll be transferring again.'

Lowenhertz shrugged. 'Not if you'll let me stay, Commander. I have looked for my place for a long time. Perhaps it is here in this company of wolves.'

'Then welcome to the White Company, warrior,' Ganz said. 'I will be proud to have you in my command.'

'I must see the priest-armourers. I'll need a new hammer consecrated.'

Ganz held out his bundle. 'No need. The Master allowed me to take this from the Temple reliquary.'

The old warhammer wrapped in the pelt was magnificent and covered in a patina of age and use.

'It belonged to a Wolf called von Glick. One of the bravest, a fellow and a friend, sorely missed. It would please him greatly for his hammer to be carried by a Wolf again rather than tarnishing in an old relic chest.'

Lowenhertz took the venerable weapon and tested its weight and balance. 'It will be an honour,' he said.

Around them, the song of the Wolf Choir rose up and soared like smoke, out of the great temple and beyond into the skies above Middenheim. ●

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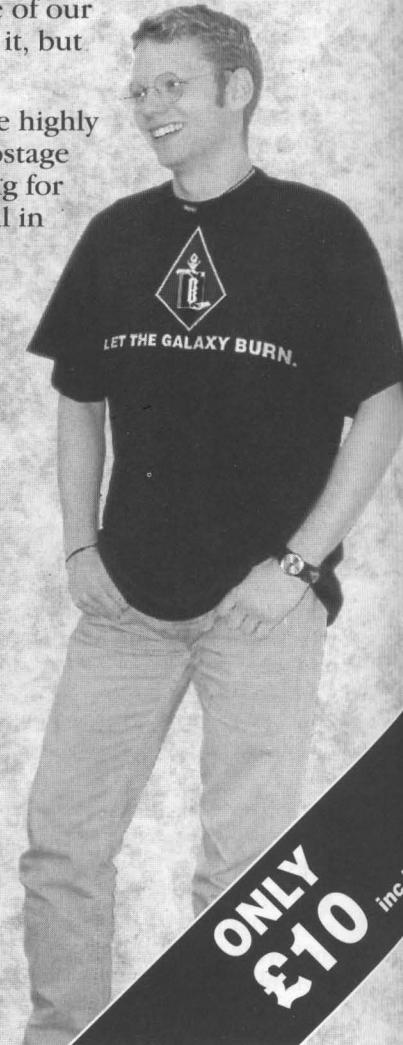
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Wolf in the Fold, by Ben Chessell

I have seen wolves before, but only in cages, rolling, barred wagons in the streets or in fairgrounds. She was a killer all right, but far from being mad. She was magnificent. She circled them once, slowly, and then rushed in, felling them with an axe-like blow of her head. There could be only one outcome. Eventually she shook herself free of the corpses and spun her coat like a hound who has come in from the rain. I gasped for air. Her head snapped up and our eyes met. A killer looked at a killer.

The Lake, by Tully R. Summers

'Spider!' R'daff's shout came from behind. Twenty feet away from Orl's flimsy boat, the surface of the lake was boiling in the flickering flare-light. The bubbling surface parted, almost like an eye opening. Glistening purple chitin emerged amidst flailing, many-jointed legs and the air filled with an eerie wailing. Lord Orl chambered another shell. Before he could slam it home, the immense, reeking monster was upon them, crawling up the side of the boat, blade-tipped legs clawing into the wood. Orl jammed the barrel of his shotgun into the slavering jaws and pulled the trigger.

Acceptable Losses, by Gav Thorpe

'For we are the talons of Emperor!' Flight Commander Jaeger said, his voice deep and full of conviction. 'Just as this ship is named the *Divine Justice*, so too must we be the instrument of the Emperor's vengeance. No mercy, no forgiveness; just the surety of swift justice and sure death!'

'Swift justice, sure death!' came the cry from twenty-nine throats. It echoed around the flight bay, making the crews of the other Marauder squadrons turn in surprise.

Jaeger grinned, his heart beating fast. 'Damn right!'

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing, by Dan Abnett

They found Drakken in a clearing. His horse was dead, and so was one of the knights who had ambushed him. He was surrounded by four more dark warriors, each clad in strangely angular black plate armour with spike-pointed helmets, a fine mesh of chainmail rattling around their waists and swinging dark blue, serrated swords that hooked into fang-like curves. There was something insubstantial about the edges of them, as if they were solidifying out of the mist and darkness itself.

Also featuring...

Unearthed Remains, graveside goings-on in the dark streets of Altdorf, by Gordon Rennie and Simon Davis; *Raptor Squadron*, Karl Kopinski's look at a Marauder bomber flight; more breakneck action in *Obvious Tactics* from David Pugh; and searing artwork from Wayne England and Jeff Waye!

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